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Ruth Wiltsher

M7218868

Are Access courses successful?

A case study of Access courses in a

Further Education college

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD)

2005

AUTHOR NO M7218868

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Abstract

Access to Higher Education (HE) courses provided in Further Education (FE) Colleges are an established part of the Government's drive to widen participation in HE. Like all FE courses, Access courses must justify their continuation by demonstrating their success. This dissertation reports on a case study of Access courses provided by one department in a general FE College in the North of England, and examines whether or not they are successful.

A review of relevant literature suggests that a key issue is by what criteria Access courses are to be judged. Policy makers, quality assurance agencies, HE Institutions, college managers, course managers, course tutors and students all have perspectives on 'success', which overlap and often are in tension.

The research explores these perspectives, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, using an ethnographical framework. Semi-structured interviews with students, staff and others complement management data from internal and external sources. A grounded theory approach was used to generate themes of interest for analysis. The participant observer status of the researcher provided additional insight, as well as raising issues.

The research suggests that in the discussion of success of these Access courses there is a tension between two dominant discourses, here labelled the managerialist discourse and the humanist discourse. Tension is found to result from the difference between criteria for the success of courses and criteria for the success of individuals. The research demonstrates the significance of students' perspectives on 'success'.

Criteria for success that took into account more qualitative information could be developed but would require a shift in policy. Issues are raised in the dissertation concerning the reliability of available data and suggestions are made as to potential future development and further research.

Declaration

Some of the data concerning science students analysed in this dissertation was collected for a research project as part of Open University course E827. The data has been re-analysed for this project, which addresses a different research question.

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Are Access courses successful?

A case study of Access courses in a Further Education college

‘Success is relative:

It is what we can make of the mess we have made of things.’

The Family Reunion T. S. Eliot

Chapter one Setting the scene

Introduction

At the beginning of October 2000, as in the preceding years, the College in which I work in the northeast of England held the annual presentation ceremony to ‘Celebrate the success of students on Access courses’. Speakers from one of the local universities, the local Open College Network and the College Principal all emphasised both the ‘success’ of the courses and of the students. Over half the students who had gained qualifications attended, along with their families and friends: 180 people, sure that the courses were successful. For the first time in 2000 the Computing and Information Technology Access course, which is run by a different department from the Modular Access course on which this study concentrates, was taking part in the ceremony: the Access to Health course, run by yet another department, was not. Figure 1.1 shows the first PowerPoint slides from the presentation which was repeated in 2001 and succeeding years. Accompanied by music, the opening slides indicated that the college was celebrating individual achievement of the students in completing the course and the success of the course as a whole.

Two weeks earlier, the Access staff and the managers had been wrestling with different agenda. Were there enough students to run science modules this year? How many groups could run, would there be enough students, had potential students been ‘poached’? What are the aims of Access courses; social justice, widening participation, vocational? The latter questions are of particular importance to those working in locations which

Figure 1.1 PowerPoint presentation



Tonight we recognise those who have
worked so hard *this year*
on Access and C&G 730.7

2001



Any education course is only
as successful as its

S T U D E N T S



Access and C&G 730.7

are *very* successful.



They're our courses,

but your achievements.



Tonight, we celebrate the

A C H I E V E R S

People who have
succeeded...
excelled...
adapted...



are recognised as deprived. These concerns were mirrored, particularly at the beginning of the academic year, by other colleagues, including the staff involved in part-time adult courses. Later in the year, staff running A-level courses faced similar questions about hard-working students whose possible failures might adversely affect the college's position in published 'league' tables. It was reflection in previous years on experiences and questions like these that prompted the beginning of this examination of criteria for success. Access courses were chosen as the focus of the research partly because of my involvement and knowledge of such courses, but also because they have particular aims which are clearly defined. They thus provided a basis for exploring the questions raised above with respect to a clearly bounded 'case'.

In 1993 Calder looked at adult learners and success in a wider context. She argued that

... there is dissonance between perceptions of success between the learner, employer, provider and sponsor. At the present time it could be argued that the major clients of publicly-funded providers are the funding agencies and that it is their criteria rather than those of the learner which such providers seek to meet. There is an appreciation among providers of the potential of learning as a facilitator of change, at a personal and community as well as at a societal level. However this understanding does not yet appear to have been incorporated in any widely recognised outcome measures. In other words, there does not yet appear to be a way of reflecting the diversity of aims which the main parties involved in the learning process all hold. (Calder, 1993 p. 141)

Foster, *et al*, writing in *FE Matters* in 1997, also pointed to a distinction between the outcomes for providers, stakeholders and funding bodies in contrast to those experienced by the learner. They suggested that accreditation of learning outcomes may be a way forward, but pointed out that accreditation can constrain achievement, and that success may be

evaluated in ways other than learning – for example, financial and societal. McMahon (1997, 1998) and Plewis and Preston (2001) have looked at the broader social and financial benefits of education, including the long-term benefits to society and ways of evaluating these quantitatively. Plewis and Preston's report is one of several produced by the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning at the Institute of Education in London including examination of the effects of lifelong learning on improvement in health and reduction in crime rates.

However, in England the funding mechanisms developed by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (F&HEA, 1992) and by the FEFC's successor in 2001, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) have not yet incorporated Calder's 'diversity of aims', such as change at a personal level. Over ten years after the establishment of independent Further Education (FE) corporations under the 1992 Act there is a promise of change in funding mechanism, but there is a fear that adult education will not be a beneficiary (Kingston, 2003). As this research has progressed, it has become obvious that there is still a tension in FE between managers and the course tutors. So even in the twenty-first century, Calder's concerns are relevant. The tension between managers and course tutors might also be expressed as a tension between new managerialism and liberal/humanism. The tension required further explanation and analysis, as it underpinned many of the differences between the differing perspectives and possible criteria for success considered in this work.

The college in which this research is based is in a unitary local authority, (called Westland for the purposes of this study). The research described here was carried out as an insider within this institution. To put this research into context it is useful to explain my role at Westland College and why I set out to research this topic and its importance, not just for me, but also for colleagues and students. In 1994 I was appointed as a senior lecturer in charge of physics. I have a first degree in physics, qualified teacher status and a master's degree in education. In 1994 the college had just validated the Access to Science course, and I was involved in it from

1994 for the three years during which it ran. In my previous post at another college I had begun working on teacher training courses for people involved in post-compulsory education. When it became obvious that the physics work that I was doing did not fulfil the number of hours I was required to teach, I became involved again in vocational teacher training courses. I became aware that I was teaching a number of former Access to Humanities students on these courses. Following the re-validation of the Access to Humanities course in 1998 as a modular course, a module called 'Introduction to teaching' was introduced which I was asked to teach. I also took up the task of internal moderation of the new modular course. So my interest in, and involvement with, Access courses and students continued and extended. In order to provide a framework for keeping myself up to date myself on post-16 issues to support my teacher training role, I began to take relevant Open University courses, and completed two small-scale qualitative investigations as part of these. Thus although my initial academic training was in a quantitative discipline, I have increasingly been involved in qualitative research work.

Access courses

The first so-called Access courses began in 1978 from a Department of Education and Science (DES) initiative in seven Local Education Authorities (LEAs). This aimed to increase the numbers of members of ethnic minority communities in professions and Higher Education (HE), (Fieldhouse, *et al*, 1996). Fieldhouse, *et al* state that by 1994 the target groups had expanded to include women, the unemployed, and the working class and that there were then 1,000 courses with 30,000 students, still linked to HE. In 1989 the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) and the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) established a network for recognition of Access courses. As this network was regionally organised, different Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) 'kitemarked' very different courses. Access courses were required to target mature students (over 21), those who did not have conventional qualifications, and students who wished to return to study before entering HE. They were expected to be responsive to local needs. From their

beginning these courses anticipated the widening participation moves of the 1990s. When the CNAA was abolished following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, the responsibility for the national framework was passed to the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) and the local Open College Networks (OCNs) became the regional AVAs

In 1987 the Conservative government's White Paper *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (DES, 1987) had endorsed Access to HE courses. In March 1999 this endorsement was confirmed by Labour's Baroness Blackstone who put them alongside A-levels and Advanced GNVQs as a third route to university entrance. In 2001 the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), which since 1997 has been responsible for them, listed 33 Authorised Validating Agencies for Access courses, mostly regional Open College Networks. The AVAs are now inspected by the QAA. There are currently about 1200 programmes and about 40,000 students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. A database of courses and information is now available on the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) website, which reports that three quarters of students from Access courses progressing to university go to local universities. In 2002-3, 2% of all entrants to universities in England and Wales held Access qualifications. The national statistics do not provide the year in which students gained an Access qualification: as some defer entry it is not possible to give figures for the percentage of Access students who progress to university in the year in which they gained their qualification. Until 2002-3 there was also no distinction between candidates holding QAA recognised Access certificates and those who were described as 'other access' students.¹ In 2001, nomenclature changed again and 'kite-marked Access courses' became 'QAA-Recognised Access Programmes'.

The QAA's description of the aim of Access courses is as follows.

The purpose and primary aim of Access to HE programmes is to provide opportunities for mature

¹ Information in this section has been gathered from the following websites: www.qaa.ac.uk, www.ucas.ac.uk, and www.dfes.gov.uk, all accessed in May 2001 and August 2003, but not referenced directly in order to preserve anonymity.

students (aged 21 and over) from disadvantaged and under-represented groups to progress to higher education. Access to HE programmes are open to those who have few, if any, formal prior qualifications. They are designed for those who wish to return to study after a number of years out of education, and are developed to build on the life experience of students, and to address their particular needs, in order to prepare them to succeed in higher education. (QAA, 2001)

However, the CNAA, the first national body with oversight for Access courses, reported that tutors considered the individual student's personal development also to be important.

The performance indicator seen as most important by Access tutors is the level of achievement and amount of progress in the personal and academic development of students relative to their individual needs and aspirations. (CNAA, 1989, cited in original course submission)

In a submission document to the local AVA the college in this case study also implied other indicators in its aims.

In addition to preparation for HE courses, the course aims include 'enhance career and employment opportunities', 'boost confidence', and 'enhance the personal and vocational lifestyle of the student'. (College submission document for Access to HE (Science) 1994, original punctuation)

In addition to these aims, comments from external examiners on outcomes suggest that other aspects may also be important:

A strong feeling in the feedback from students was their pleasure at the strength of the support from staff and from

fellow students. Added to this was the feeling among the students that they felt real sense of progress during the course, which was directly related to the course itself. (Humanities Examiner's report, 1995)

The coursework indicated that the course was preparing students very thoroughly and effectively for Higher Education... The students are clearly acquiring the analytical skills appropriate to the subjects they have studied.

(Humanities Examiner's report, 1997)

Thus there are competing agendas: QAA, CNAA, the examiners and the course team all have different perspectives. While there are some similarities in that all are concerned with progression to HE, an increased level of importance appears to be given to individual development in the CNAA extract compared to that from the QAA. The college extract also emphasises the aspect of individual progress, as does that from the 1995 external examiner. The 1997 external examiner, however, puts more emphasis on preparation for HE, which echoes the primary QAA aim. So there are competing agenda for Access course, but before looking further at the local context it is appropriate to look at the FE context in which these courses are delivered.

The Further Education background

In 1992 the Conservative government brought in the Further and Higher Education Act (F&HEA). This removed Further Education and Sixth Form colleges from local government control, established new college governing bodies (corporations) and began a new era of competitiveness. Funding was passed to a new quango: the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and 'incorporated' colleges became mini-quangos themselves, with non-elected governing bodies. The Audit Commission's report *Unfinished Business* (1993) had highlighted a concern with poor retention rates in FE.

and criticised the lack of data available on student enrolments and achievements. Exworthy and Halford (1999, p. 3) point to an increasing emphasis on 'financial accountability and effectiveness' at this time across the entire public sector. It was thus not surprising that the Funding Council introduced a national funding system in England and Wales including, in part, a formula based on records of individual students that was intended to be transparent and, eventually, to bring convergence in funding between the different types of colleges. Esland, *et al* (1999) consider that this new system increased the need for colleges to alter their structures and made the introduction of reforms based on business models inevitable.

The formula was extremely complex: it attached 'units' of funding to individual students, and was intended to 'encourage retention and achievement' (Ainley and Bailey, 1997, p. 20). Although transparent, it was also considered 'Byzantine' in its complexity, (*ibid.* p. 18). Only approved courses, including 'Access courses preparing students for entry to a course of HE' were funded (FEFC, 1992). 'Units' were 'earned' per student for guidance, enrolment, retention (counted on the first of November, February and May) and achievement of final certification. The mechanism thus required a complex system of reporting on individual students, known as the ISR (individual student record), the setting and meeting of targets, and a complex system of bidding for funds. In April 2001, the FEFC was replaced in England by a national Learning and Skills Council (LSC), and by 47 local councils. These combine the funding roles of the work-based Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) and the FEFC. Although it was hoped that eventually there would be some simplification of funding, initially, the same system was operated, with a continuing emphasis on financial accountability. However, local partnership and collaboration rather than competitiveness were promised.

Independence or 'incorporation' also meant the end of nationally negotiated pay scales and conditions for staff. Incorporation and the consequent changes in funding led to restructuring within colleges, with new management structures, the growth of an emphasis on a business culture and the emergence of what has been called the 'new managerialism' (Exworthy

and Halford, 1999, p. 2). Within Westland college new contracts were offered and the majority of staff transferred to these, despite the increased hours of teaching and reduced holidays, as theoretically the new contracts were more flexible and would be linked to future pay rises.

The FEFC established an inspectorate to assess the quality of further education. This replaced the Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools (HMI) system but developed along different lines from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) system which replaced the HMI regime in schools. In April 2001, with the demise of the FEFC, inspection passed to OFSTED, operating under a common inspection framework with a new Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) for courses such as Access to HE which involve adults.

Since the mid 1990s there has been a renewed interest in lifelong learning in the UK to which FE is positioned as making a significant contribution. The Conservative government published *Lifetime learning - a consultation document*, (DFEE, 1995) with an emphasis on learning for the economic good of the country. The general election in May 1997 replaced the Conservative government with a Labour one, and the subsequent Queen's speech promoted lifelong learning and Further Education. A month later the FEFC published *Learning Works* (Kennedy, 1997), a report by a committee chaired by Helena Kennedy into post-16 education and widening participation in further education. This made a strong case for the promotion of lifelong learning, this time both for 'economic success and social cohesion' (Kennedy, 1997 p. 15). Part of the government's lifelong learning agenda is an increase in the number of people entering HE. A major part of this increase has to come from widening participation (Bromley, 2002). FE colleges have a part to play in this, and their funding is now 'uplifted' for those coming from 'poor' postcodes (College management information system manager). Access courses have always been targeted at groups under-represented in HE (Fieldhouse, *et al*, 1996). Indeed the current QAA description of them says they are 'targeted, in particular,' at these groups, taking 'into account the needs and circumstances of local groups' (QAA, 2003). The post-16 education sector

has therefore undergone considerable change since the 1990s, the aims of Access courses is now not simply to widen participation, but to contribute to lifelong learning and social inclusion.. Having examined the background to FE and Access courses nationally it is necessary to examine the local context.

The local context

Throughout this report names of people, places and institutions have been changed to aid anonymity. The town of Westland has an old fishing port and a newer industrial area: these were combined as one borough in 1967. In 1974 the borough became part of a new county. In 1992 the county was divided into separate unitary councils. Westland is one of the smallest unitary councils in England, with a population of just under 100,000, 1.2% from ethnic minority groups. At the time of the research, 1997 to 2003, the town had a Labour council and MP. Until the latter part of the twentieth century the area was a prosperous commercial port, surrounded by heavy industry. It is still an industrial port but the heavy industry has declined. Although there are a few new 'high-tech' firms, the largest being just outside the town boundary, the largest employers in the town are the local health trust and the town council. The town has thus been subject to considerable change in prosperity and in organisation.

From summer 2000 the town has been in the worst 10 out of 350 local authority districts in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions deprivation tables. There is an official unemployment rate of 11.2%, which is the highest in the local Learning and Skills Council region. In one month in 1998 the town had the second highest unemployment rate for England. There is variation in reported unemployment figures between wards in the town from 20% to 6%. Students from most of the town's wards attract higher funding for the college because of their 'deprived' status. Educational statistics show that in 1997 at GCSE there was a 29.1% achievement of 5+ GCSE grades at C or higher, compared with the national average of 45.1%, and low progression rates to post-16 education. Although these rates have improved since 1997, the town still has

achievement and progression rates below the national average. There is also a high crime rate: the local police force, which covers a wider area than the town, has a crime rate of over 100 incidents per 1000 population and is in the worst five in the country. The national average is 78 and the neighbouring authority has a rate below this.²

The college is a general FE college built in the early 1960s. In July 2002 there were 839 full-time, 6793 part-time students, and 936 students on work-related courses, including New Deal programmes for unemployed people. Of these students 20% were in the 16-19 age range, 11% were 20-25, 20% were 26-35 and 49% were 36 and over. There were slightly more males than females. The college is in the centre of the town and has a nursery. There are 200 teaching staff, including part-timers, and 173 support staff. The courses offered by the college range from HNDs to A-level GCEs to NVQ level 1 in a variety of subjects from motor vehicle repair to computing, vocational teacher training and the Access to HE courses to be considered here. Since 1993 when the college became independent of the local education authority, new sections have been added for catering, hairdressing and a centre of excellence for ICT, using City Challenge and European Commission (EC) funding. In its last FEFC inspection in 1998 the college gained high grades, including a 1 (highest grade) for support for students, and was subsequently awarded accredited status. In a subsequent Office for Standards in Education and Adult Learning Inspectorate inspection (OFSTED/ALI) these grades were again achieved.

There are five universities within 30 miles of the town: one is a Russell group member, (Russell) about 20 miles away with a secondary campus within 10 miles, another redbrick, (Jamestown), and three ex-polytechnics, (Haymarket, Hammerton and Riverside). There are rail and bus links with all of these establishments. The college runs franchised HND and foundation degree courses from Riverside. In addition, Certificate of Education/Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) and a BA in

² Figures taken from DETR, Town Council and College statistics which are not directly referenced to preserve anonymity.

education and training courses are run in partnership with Hammerton. So there are local opportunities for student progression to HE, as well as opportunities further afield.

Within the town there are two other establishments offering 16-19 education: a small sixth form college and a Roman Catholic secondary school. Since the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 made it also independent of local education authority control, the sixth form college has offered some courses to adults, including, initially, an Access course. At the beginning of this research in 1999 there was therefore a choice of establishment within the town for would-be Access students.

The Town Council offers courses to adults using European Commission (EC) and Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) grants, and some community associations have also received funding for some courses for adults. There is at present no town-wide coordination of these courses, and there is little cooperation between providers: for example, although the Town Council commissioned surveys of adult courses the full reports are not readily accessible. The new national and local Learning and Skills Councils inspected the area as well as the college in late 2001 and following this report partnerships have been established both at regional LSC and town level to discuss strategies, but no action on coordination of adult courses has, as yet, followed.

Access provision in Westland College

In the northeast of England one of the validating agencies for Access courses organised a common curriculum framework and examination system for all participating organisations, while another locally based agency (LAF) validated different courses in each participating organisation. Hence the courses at the college in question, initially validated by LAF, are unique, and, following the closure of both a short-lived Town Council run course (1998-9) and the course run by the sixth-form college from 1995 to 2000, are the only ones within the town. The courses under consideration were developed in a general studies department: a humanities based course

was the first to be developed in 1988, followed by a science-based course in 1994. In 1995-6 LBOCN, the locally based regional Open College Network, succeeded LAF as the local AVA, and new or revalidated courses are now all modular in form.

The daytime courses involve 16 hours of contact time for 36 weeks, and in 1998-1999 included for the first time some students on New Deal. The full-time humanities course has run since 1988, but it has only been possible to run the later science version for three years from 1994-7. The part-time humanities course started in 1989 and requires attendance for two evenings a week over two years. This course has always recruited enough students to be allowed to run. However, a specialised evening science course, developed at the request of the local Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and aimed at people in science-related employment, has been offered twice but has never recruited enough students to run. When the humanities courses were revalidated in 1998, the opportunity was taken to change the daytime and evening courses to one framework and to broaden the new course into a more general modular Access course, including science modules. This was an attempt to run science courses by conflating numbers, to provide one administrative framework for all the courses and to allow more choice for students. In 2000 and 2001 there were sufficient student enrolments to run biology and chemistry modules during the day and biology in the evening. Two more vocationally based courses in other departments have been added to the college’s portfolio, in Computing and Information Technology (from 1996) and Health Studies (from 1997). The courses that are considered in this work are summarised in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Access to HE courses in the General Studies Department

	Type	Attendance	Time
1988-1998	humanities	full-time	day
1989-1998	humanities	part-time	evening
1994-1997	science	full-time	day
1998 onwards	modular	full-time/part-time	day/evening

As explained earlier these courses are run in one department of the College. This department has changed over the years considered, both in name and composition, but has its roots in 'general education', and its members have been responsible for many of the adult liberal education courses delivered by the college. Although there have been changes in the staffing of the Access courses considered, all the course leaders have long-term involvement with the courses, one since 1988.

The courses at Westland College are delivered in a town with high unemployment and low academic achievement, in a college where there is a long history of response to changing local needs. Access courses provide opportunities for students to widen their opportunities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that lecturing staff involved in Access courses see them as a powerful tool for this. The college itself is justly proud of the students' achievements as the Celebration of Achievement attests. Nevertheless the college is constrained by funding mechanisms in what it can offer and the funding depends on the success of the courses. But is 'success' for funding purposes the same as 'success' from the college's or a student's perspective? As is shown later students praise the courses. But are the courses 'successful'?

Against the background of change, accountability and concern with lifelong learning outlined above, 'success' criteria have emerged. However, these criteria are varied and must be considered against the background of educational and social change. The main research question is therefore 'In what ways are Access courses 'successful'? In order to answer this question other questions must be explored.

By what criteria are courses said to be successful, and from whose perspective?

What is the student understanding of success, and do different students have different perspectives?

Are there changes in the student perceptions over time?

Have these Access courses allowed students to undertake further 'successful' study as intended?

The focus in these questions is on the different perspectives of 'success', in particular those of Access students themselves, and the rationale behind these questions will now be briefly explored.

What is the student understanding of success, and do different students have different perspectives?

Although local questionnaires on students' perceptions of courses are required for funding purposes, these are in practice, mainly directed at induction and facilities rather than teaching and learning. So in order to explain the students' perspectives their backgrounds were explored and some were interviewed. Although course and university tutors, and external moderators were also interviewed, the focus of the empirical research was on students' individual perceptions as these are not recorded in formal records or surveys. Since 2002 the LSC has carried out a national telephone survey of students in FE and work-based learning. Although students from a variety of courses and of different ages were interviewed, the results are not reported by course (LSC, 2004). Without students there would be no courses, so it was considered particularly important to explore students' understanding of 'success', in whatever ways this emerged.

Are there changes in the student perceptions over time?

This question was important as there is increasing recognition of the longer term effects of education (Trow, 1994). It is also acknowledged that these effects are harder to measure (Schuller et al., 2001). Although this is a case study piece of research, it seemed important to include an element of longitudinal study in order to review the post-HIE experiences of students. Tracking subjects over a lengthy period of time is fraught with difficulty, but some ex-students were still in touch. The validity of the success criteria identified by students is enhanced insofar as their perceptions are consistent over time.

Have these Access courses allowed students to undertake further 'successful' study as intended?

As progression to HE courses is a primary aim of the courses, it was important to explore both the progression of students and their further progression in HE. Although informal contact is kept with some students, no formal attempt is made to monitor students' progress in HE. In practice, only students' intended destinations are known, and even whether they take up places is not formally monitored. Any information gained during this research would be important both to staff and as information for new students.

In chapter two, relevant literature is reviewed; including sources discussing the FE background as well as Access course themselves. Chapter three reviews the methodology used and the methods employed. Chapter four presents the data gathered: both qualitative and quantitative and analyses the findings. Finally in chapter five the data is further analysed and conclusions are drawn for policy, practice and research.

At the start of the research it was not clear what material would be available, particularly with respect to College records. It was not initially clear whether the questions could be answered. From the data gathered, both qualitative and quantitative, I set out to find and compare success criteria, both from institutional and personal levels for staff and students, by which courses are being judged, and how they may be judged in the future. Given that funding is tied to some criteria of success, and whether they are met is hence important for institutions, these questions are of importance, both on a national and an individual scale, in theory and in practice. As a lecturer in FE these questions have practical and theoretical importance for me and the students with whom I work. The questions are also important for the course tutors with whom I work who are involved at a day-to-day level at the interface between students and management. So 'what is meant by success' matters because of policy initiatives and funding regimes, because the college is in a deprived area and because, from a more personal dimension,

it is an important question for staff and students involved in a range of courses, but particularly those students targeted by Access courses.

Introduction

This literature review seeks first to locate this research in the context of research in FE in general. It then looks at discussion of the evaluation of courses in FE which provides the general background to ideas of ‘success’. As the focus of the research is Access courses, literature on Access courses generally is reviewed; then the focus is narrowed to discussions of success in Access courses in particular. The analytical framework of this study makes use of a distinction between two perspectives on education, called here the managerialist and the liberal humanist perspectives: literature on these perspectives is reviewed in the light of the focus on FE and Access courses.

Research in FE

Before looking at literature on Access courses themselves it is appropriate to review some of the research literature on the FE sector as a whole. FE is generally considered an under-researched and under-reported sector – a ‘Cinderella’ in this area as in many others (Hugill, 1995, Young and Lucas, 1999). This is partly for historical reasons (Elliott, 1996), and certainly in neither of the two FE colleges at which I have worked, before or since incorporation, have staff contracts included research or even study time. Professional development has been generally linked instrumentally to the strategic aims of the institution rather than to consideration of reflective practice or individual personal development (Walker and Green, 2001). Much of the research that has been done is descriptive or survey-based, focused on specific practical issues, as are many of the Further Education Development Association (FEDA) *Bulletins* and *Reports*. There is an increasing number of journals covering the field, such as the *Journal of Further and Higher Education* and *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, and growing FE Research Networks. However, a brief survey shows that the majority of the members of the editorial boards and authors are from Higher Education Institutes rather than FE colleges. For example,

Outsider on the inside, a first person's account of the research process in further education, (Robson, 1998) looking at the difficulties of the research process in FE, is written by a university lecturer, and no article in an issue in 2000 of the *Journal of Further and Higher Education* devoted to FE had any authors from FE. Helena Kennedy (1997) commented upon the huge diversity of learners in FE, but it is the vocational aspects of training which are more written about and reported. The FE sections of *The Guardian* and *Times Educational Supplement* generally mirror this emphasis.

Since 1992 there has been increasing interest in studies of the sector that have looked at change and management: a special issue of the *Journal of Further and Higher Education* (2000) was entirely devoted to this. Ainley and Bailey (1997) looked at staff and student experiences in FE following incorporation. While the book claims to be qualitative and descriptive rather than analytical it does end with an attempt to explain the contrasting views of the sector held by managers, students and teachers in terms of the constraints laid on them by incorporation and the funding regime.

While these surveys and descriptive accounts are illuminative and were used to inform this study, there is comparatively little research on teaching, learning and assessment issues within the sector. This may in part be attributed to the diversity of the sector both in age and in type of course, but the growing demands for the professionalisation of staff in the sector have not been matched by an increase in research activity comparable to that in the schools sector.

Evaluating courses in FE

An important factor in FE, as in other public services, has been increasing accountability. For example, the Audit Commission's report (1993), *Unfinished Business*, which was quite clear that courses for 16-19 year olds with large drop-out were neither successful nor good value for money. These concerns were reflected in the climate of accountability and value for money instituted by the FEFC, (Bloomer, 1997) and extended to all courses. The funding mechanisms currently in place 'reward' colleges for retention

and achievement in addition to enrolment, implying that students who drop out or complete courses without gaining a qualification are indicators of lack of success. McGivney (1996) suggests that some institutions now avoid the word drop-out and claims that some withdrawals are for positive reasons. Tight (1998) questions the assumption that courses without qualifications are without value. Walker and Green (2001) have looked at ethical frameworks in FE and whilst suggesting that 'the primary and incontestable rationale is one of learner achievement', argue that there is a tension between the managerial discourse which emphasises efficiency and that of staff within the sector. Bloomer (1997), Bloomer and Hodgkinson (1999), Bennett, *et al* (1994) and Doherty (1994) all suggest wider criteria than statistics are required.

Bloomer and Hodgkinson (1999) claim that the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and changes in the economic climate have led to 'a policy driven, FE obsession with retention and completion' (p. 114). Aspinall (cited in Bennett, *et al*, 1994, p. 209) agrees that 'success criteria, performance indicators, and target setting have recently gained currency'. Malcolm Wicks, minister for lifelong learning, told the Association for Colleges' conference in November 1999 that colleges must increase achievement and reduce drop-out, which was 'way too high' (in McGavin, 1999). Some reports on student retention and drop-out are available. Martinez and Munday's report (1998) is based on work in 31 colleges. Of these, only one focused their contribution on adults, and the majority concentrated on full-time students, although nationally in 1995 three-quarters of the students in FE were adults, and the majority were part-time (McGivney, 1996). McGivney's report on completion and retention looked at students in both FE and HE: 15 FE sector colleges and 10 AVAs were involved. She reports considerable variations, both within and between AVAs for Access students. The small sample and variations in the way statistics are gathered distort the figures, but it appears that retention rate is about 65%, achievement 60%, and progression to HE is about 80% of the achievement figure, i.e. 48% of enrolment. Hayes and King (1997) also reports 60% achievement in a paper on former Access students' approaches to study in HE.

In analysing the factors for withdrawal, McGivney (1996) suggests that they can be classified as course, institutional, environmental, personal or motivational. Martinez and Munday (1998), who also report large variations in figures between colleges, suggest that personal circumstances are significant for 35-55 year olds. They too cite motivation and course-related problems as relevant, but also false expectations, poor placement on courses, and early problems with settling in and coursework.

The McGivney and Martinez reports looked mainly at data drawn from institutional surveys. Using a different approach, Coare and Thomson (1996) collected the personal experiences of adult students across a wide range of courses, including FE, to show the benefits of study to, and problems of adult students. Motivation, challenges, learning experiences and achievement are all illustrated by extracts from students' diaries. Bloomer and Hodgkinson (1997, 1999) also looked at students' perceptions in a longitudinal study of FE, in order 'to throw light upon the meaning of value on FE'. Their work is with 16-19 year olds, but provides a way of looking at students' careers in terms of risk, and continuity and change (1999, p. 97), which was used in the initial analysis of qualitative data. Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) earlier proposed a sociological model of career-decision making, again based on young people, which with adaptation can be used here. Foster, *et al*'s 1997 report on adult learners 'aims to contribute to the development of good practice in recognising learners' goals and achievements for learning which is not designed to lead to qualifications' (p. 5). It attempts to meet a challenge (in Foster, *et al*, 1997) by Kathryn Ecclestone to find ways of recognising achievement without necessarily using accreditation. In addressing this challenge, Foster, *et al* look at ways in which outcomes for both learners and providers can be classified. Hull (1998) has also looked at personal effects of adult education. She looked at the effect on self-esteem, using as part of her sample students from Access humanities courses in the college in question. Schauer mann (cited in Doherty, 1994) suggests that institutional factors should be combined with personal factors to produce weighted figures in a 'synthesized matrix', (p. 254) that compares the importance of factors to

different groups such as students and staff. While this is an interesting approach it requires a larger sample than is available here. All this work raises again the question of ‘student interests’. Not all outcomes serve student interests, and in weighing factors affecting achievement, the question ‘what is appropriate achievement?’ must be considered. This also relates to the research question of whose perspective is to be used.

Bromley (2002), working at the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), was able to look at Access provision in England on a much larger scale as the work was commissioned by the LSC, and national ISR data was made available to her. Despite the greater resources and access to statistics provided to the LSDA the research itself is limited as in other cases. The commissioning of this work implies that Access courses are seen as important to the LSC which is their major funding body. Bromley was asked to make recommendations for the future with a focus on the Higher Education (HE) targets for 2001. Thus the emphasis in her work is on the progression of students to HE.

While McGivney’s (2002) discussion paper on achievement and progression in adult learning mainly addressed the issues of non-accredited courses, she gave a list of ‘soft’ outcomes which were seen by tutors and students as of importance. Because of the importance given to ‘progression’ by funding bodies she classified these softer outcomes as types of progression. She looked at:

- progression to other courses, both at the same level and at other levels;
- personal progression, including confidence, autonomy, self-esteem, wider aspirations, change of attitude;
- social progression, including civic participation;
- economic progression, including employment, gaining a job and advancement; and
- collective progression, including networking.

This analysis of progression is of direct relevance to the research described here, although the small scale nature of this research and its time scale has limited the extent to which it could be applied.

In their research report on the wider benefits of learning Preston and Hammond (2002) investigated practitioners' views of the wider benefits of FE. Their findings were grouped under different names from McGivney, but include very similar themes: self-esteem, social networks, and greater control and management of students' lives being seen as the major benefits. In particular for Access students, practitioners thought that 'efficacy' benefits were most likely to be seen, that is 'courses are useful in terms of life and career management' (p. 13). 'Efficacy' included factors such as political involvement, control of one's life, and mental health. Mental health encompassed self-esteem and psychological health, while political involvement included items such as voting and political interest. Preston and Hammond's research (2002) used sophisticated data handling techniques to model and group the perceived benefits. While the research 'revealed novel and unexpected findings concerning practitioner views' (p. 38) in 'a relatively uncharted field' (p. 39) its brief did not include examining the views of students or devising any means of measuring these perceived benefits to the community, colleges or students. These areas were left for future research. This research is again relevant to this study, and although it was published too late for many of the benefits to be incorporated in the work it was possible to look very briefly at citizenship. As stated earlier, many of the surveys and reports discussed have focused on progression issues. Although these issues are important for students, they are also factors which are more easily measurable or discussed than are the long-term and complex factors discussed by Preston and Hammond. Nor do Preston and Hammond take into account student perspectives, nor suggest any way of measuring them. The new framework for inspecting FE provision for adults in England developed jointly between OFSTED and ALI (2001) does consider personal goals, personal development and student satisfaction to be important, but does not assess them in reports on organisations.

Access courses and the adult experience in FE

The focus of this research is Access to HE courses in FE. General accounts of adult education, such as Fieldhouse, *et al* (1996) usually include a brief mention of Access courses as an alternative course to A-levels for adults. More detailed discussion of the origins is given by Parry (1992) and Davies (1993) who describe the formation of the national framework for recognition of courses, known as 'kitemarking'. Access courses are a small part of a more general debate on access or accessibility, and there is a wealth of literature on participation and non-participation associated with this, including two yearly reports from the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) such as Sargant, *et al* (1997), and Tuckett and Sargant (1999). Diamond (1999) suggests that Access courses have achieved legitimacy and have a future, but that this must involve a shift towards a more flexible format. This echoes Tight (1993) who suggested that it is important to maintain a broader vision of access, and that Access courses can create ghettos and assume progression to HE to be the only aim of the courses. The focus of this work is on courses which are delivered as Access to HE courses.

McGivney (1996), working at NIACE on a survey of the retention of mature students in FE and HE, noted that records held by AVAs are a useful source of information concerning mature students. However, within the information from the AVAs that she obtained, there were differing 'perspectives of what is an acceptable completion rate' (p. 79) and one course had only a 38% progression rate to university courses. The 2001-2 report of the local open college network (LBOCN) gives a total enrolment of 1423 students on Access programmes. There was just over 50% (720) achievement of the full QAA award and a further 252 students achieved partial credit. In 1999-2000 there was a progression rate to university of 43%, but course providers, from whom these figures come, reported 34% of destinations as unknown, which brings into question the accuracy of the reporting of the progression figures.¹ These data exemplify some of the difficulties inherent in this type of quantitative data, where the base figures

¹ from LBOCN reports

are dubious or unclear. Indeed, Blaxter (1999) suggests that there is a danger that the 'the rules of funding shape the quantitative data on participation', and that many people are 'sceptical about numerical records' (p. 22). To obtain more reliable data, LBOCN commissioned research into progression rates using information from the local universities. Although this was sent in an anonymised form to the College, neither the Access coordinator nor I could find a copy of it. I was given permission by the LBOCN chief executive to access the material directly and was finally able to accomplish this towards the end of this study. This led to further problems as there were inconsistencies between the report and college data which are explored later. It is therefore perhaps even more important to look at qualitative research in this field.

In Scotland, the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), which began in 1988, has close links with universities and provides a 'systematic national approach to encouraging adult access to higher education' (Powney and Hall, 1998, p. 3). This is in contrast to the English programme discussed in this research in which there are a variety of schemes recognised by local validating agencies. SWAP has been extensively researched by Munn and others for the Scottish Council for Research into Education (SCRE). Munn, *et al* (1993, 1994) surveyed students' perceptions and 'the effectiveness' of the courses, (Munn, *et al*, 1993, p. 114). The main emphasis in the work was the 'effectiveness of Access courses in preparing adults for degree level study' (Munn, *et al*, 1994, p. 11), rather than any consideration of the wider benefits. This research was continued by Powney and Hall (1998) who followed the students into HE and reviewed their progress there. This longitudinal study also looked back at the students' experiences on their Access courses. From the original 100 students, 43 remained in contact throughout the research. In the telephone interviews conducted, the students reported an increase in confidence arising from participation in the SWAP courses, but also the difficulties that they had encountered on transferring to university, many of which were personal rather than academic. In contrast to these studies, the work described here, as well as being within the English educational framework, has an emphasis on the Access courses and the students themselves.

In England, West (1995) followed a group of 30 Access and foundation students at two FE colleges in Kent from 1992 to 1995, following their careers as they moved on from the first courses. He interviewed them in depth, using a life history approach, as his primary interest was in motivation and the psychological effects of such study. His findings were similar to those of the SCRE research, in that many students had personal as well as academic difficulties on transfer to HE. Hull (1998), in her study, which included 40 access students from Westland College, was also interested, like West, in the psychological effect of courses on self-esteem. She, too, queried the reliance on end results as performance indicators rather than more subjective learning outcomes. She considered that 'the emphasis on the end result serves to undervalue the learning process' (p. 17): a view that is not reflected in the current use by the LBOCN of outcomes in the validation of Access courses where academic outcomes are specified and measured. All the studies discussed above point to benefits which students gained from the courses beyond the academic, but also highlight the difficulties that many of them experienced.

Reay, *et al* (2002), in a more recent study of the choice of Higher Education Institution as part of the widening participation debate, looked at the experiences of 23 inner London Access students, seven of whom did not continue to HE. There was much greater ethnic diversity, but the difficulties encountered by the students were similar to those encountered by students in the present research: finance, time management and other personal problems. The research by Reay, *et al* (2002) employed in-depth interviews with the 23 students, concentrating, in particular, on seven who did not go on to HE. Their conclusion, that there are some inadequacies in Access courses despite the dedication of tutors, is one which is investigated in this research.

Shah (1994) has given a personal account of her experiences as an Access student in order to highlight some of the difficulties for students in terms of class, gender and race. Rosen (1993) found that there were difficulties for Access students moving on to HE, but was not sure to what extent these

were due to racism or the perceived view of Access students in HE. This is echoed in the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) research which looked at the performance of Access students in degree courses as part of a longitudinal study, (Munn, *et al*, 1993, 1994, Powney and Hall, 1998). One of their recommendations was that there was a need for HEIs to consider carefully the support given to Access students which is likely to be less than that received during their Access courses. The first section of Calder's book *Disaffection and Diversity* (1993) concentrates on Access courses, while the later sections move from barriers to learning for adults to wider issues, including, again, the need for new measures of success. The majority of the texts above which look at learners' experiences discuss a broad view of the outcomes of education.

As noted before, much of the research is survey-based or descriptive, limited in scale, as is this research, to a small number of students or institutions. As such there are issues of generalisability which will be discussed later, however, the background provided by the literature discussed informed the research questions by suggesting some of the factors which are considered important when discussing views of success. In the literature, there is some attempt to draw on student experiences, but this does not clearly inform discussion of success.

What does success mean in Access courses?

Student 'success' is a contested notion: framed in different ways by different discourses. Like 'education' it has different uses and definitions which compete. These 'reflect the different and competing valuations and orientations of the educational community' (Hartnett and Naish, 1976 p. 78). Disputes about success criteria will similarly reflect the different values and orientations of the discourses involved. These values and orientations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and it is important to acknowledge, as Hammersley (1992) asserts in relation to epistemology, that 'dichotomies obscure the range of options open to us' (p. 171).

From the point of view of senior management, within an institutional discourse, is the success of Access courses synonymous with 'effectiveness' as discussed by Capizzi (1996) and the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) research by Munn, *et al* (1993) into the Scottish Wider Access Programme or 'value' (Keynes and Syrad, 2000) or even 'value-added'? Or does success equate to 'quality'? Although the national framework of Access courses is maintained by the QAA, the LSC (FEFC from April 1993 to March 2001) now funds them in FE colleges. So both HE and FE organisations are involved in the quality control of Access courses. FEFC funding mechanisms 'rewarded' colleges for retention and achievement in addition to enrolment, implying that students who drop out or complete courses without gaining a qualification are indicators of lack of success. So within this institutional discourse there is a societal view of success as linked to the attainment of qualifications. But does success then merely mean 'completion' or gaining 'certification'? Is success merely, as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Fowler and Fowler, 1964, 5th edn p.1288) defines it, the 'favourable issue, accomplishment of end aimed at'? If so, who defines the 'end', and when and how should the 'end' be measured?

Trow (1994) says that students report influences from academic courses 20 to 25 years later. On a shorter time-scale, for Osbourne, *et al* (1997), one 'end' is the performance of Access students in a subsequent degree course. Students in the Scottish Wider Access Programme research looking at the performance of Access students in degree courses as part of a longitudinal study, (Munn, *et al*, 1993, 1994, Powney and Hall, 1998) were generally positive about their experience of Access courses, identifying academic as well as less formal outcomes of the courses as important. Williams and Bristow (1988) in an earlier study, reported in a paper entitled *Access and success*, also looked at experience in HE. 73% of their 30 students thought that the course had prepared them well for degree work, although their comments were general rather than specific. These works raise the question of the extent to which the views of students on what they want from, expect or gain from courses should be part of a discourse of 'success'. The SWAP students, for example, identified support from staff and networks of fellow students as strengths of the courses but these support networks are not

formally assessed. Thus the area of student perspectives or ‘interests’ is not clear and will be discussed later.

The Quality Assurance Agency description of Access courses has progression to HE as the primary aim of Access courses, but ‘progression’ i.e. starting an HE course, is not the same as being prepared for the demands of an HE course, nor is it the same as completing such a course. In addition to the far-reaching consequences described by Trow (1994), Sand (1998) suggests that there are other unexpected circumstances leading to ‘fundamental changes in self-perception, identity and levels of confidence’ (p. 35). These outcomes and changes are much harder to quantify and measure than statistical outcomes. Hayes and King (1997) suggest that Access courses are student and learning-centred rather than syllabus or institution-based. This might suggest that it is appropriate also to take into account the views of students in determining success criteria for these courses? This would point to a discourse focused on ‘softer’ learning outcomes and success factors. Thus there is no general agreement about what is meant by success in the sector. However, before looking further at the meaning of ‘success’, it is useful to look at how these views are situated within the framework of the purposes of education as perceived from within different discourses.

There is a long tradition of continuing debate about the purpose and delivery of adult education, as of all education. The two main strands to be discussed here are encapsulated in Will Hutton’s Foreword to *Knowledge and Neighbourhood: Education, Politics and Work* (in Avis, *et al*, 1996). On the one hand he says there are those who believe that ‘Education is the central plank of our civilization. It is the essential transmission mechanism that allows the individual to become a thinking and empowered citizen’ (Hutton, 1996, p. vii). This view reflects the liberal democratic or humanistic tradition, although the phrase ‘transmission mechanism’ may not fit the whole spectrum of liberal education. On the other hand there are those who insist that the duty of education is ‘rather to propel Britain up the international economic league’, (Hutton, 1996, p. vii). It is from this latter view that a managerialistic approach to adult education and its delivery has

developed. The economic imperative has resulted in a strengthening of management aims directed at achieving certain outcomes. Of course, bearing in mind Hammersley's (1992) warning about dichotomies obscuring options, these should not be read as simply opposing purposes. Indeed, much policy on lifelong learning in the UK explicitly includes both these purposes and others, and in practice all are drawn upon: they are merely distinguished for analytical purposes at this stage. The following sections look at managerialism and the humanist tradition within the context of FE colleges and Access courses.

Two views: new managerialism

Randle and Brady (1997) include amongst other characteristics of new managerialism:

- strict financial management;
- efficient use of resources and an emphasis on productivity;
- extensive use of performance indicators; and
- consumer charters as mechanisms for accountability, (p. 230).

Leathwood (2000) supports this analysis.

The rise of managerialism in education is seen by some as a direct consequence of Callaghan's Ruskin College speech in 1976 (Esland, 1996). Esland considers this speech to have been the first statement of an economic purpose for education by a British government. While this may be true of statements at a governmental level, economic concerns have always been a strong factor in links between education and local industries (Fieldhouse, *et al*, 1996), for example, the specialised engineering courses developed at some local polytechnics and the schools set up by the Quaker mining companies in the nearby North Pennines. Becher and Maclure (1978) suggest that while Callaghan's speech did not include the term 'accountability' it did open up a general consideration of educational issues. Callaghan's Labour government was succeeded in November 1979 by the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher. Some see the election of the 1979 Conservative government as marking the end of post-war liberal consensus which had existed through Labour and Conservative governments

since the end of the 1939-45 war (Jones, *et al*, 2001). Callaghan's speech suggests that in education at least that there was already a move from liberal views, and Taylor (1996) suggests that there had been strong moves towards utilitarianism in education since 1945. That this was in a speech by a Labour prime minister also points to the fact that a belief in the economic purpose of education has not been confined to right wing politicians.

Esland (1996) sees this speech as marking an abrupt change in education and training policy 'which has continued to legitimate a narrow, utilitarian and superficial view of education based on a seriously flawed analysis of Britain's economic decline' (p. 47). This utilitarian approach which conflates education with training has led to the imposition of a business ethic on FE colleges, and hence the culture of managerialism. Avis (1996) sees managerialism 'as the incursion of a capitalist market-orientated logic into educational relations' (p. 110). Esland, *et al* (1999) typify the political agenda leading to managerialism as 'underpinned by notions of value-for-money, competition and marketization (sic)' (p. 175). It could be argued that managerialism has been imposed on the FE sector by the changes in funding by the FEFC and then by the LSC consequent on incorporation. Coffield (2002) takes a wider view, maintaining that the advocacy of business models in education is part of a consensus in thinking across a number of Western governments. Wherever or whenever it originates there is general agreement that a business model prevails in management and funding in the current FE sector

Looking at the wider public sector, Causer and Halford (1999) think that the application of a business model in the public sector has led to a division between professionals and managers. Historically, in education, teachers and lecturers have moved from the classroom into management as they progressed up the career ladder, often maintaining a small number of teaching hours. Now, this residual contact with the 'chalk-face' is becoming rarer, and according to Gleeson (2001) the appointment of senior managers from outside the education world is becoming more common. It is not clear, however, whether this applies to 'curriculum' managers or to the increasing number of managers of 'support' services in areas such as

finance and marketing. Writing about secondary schools, Causer and Halford (1999) suggest that there is also an increase in 'the importance of managerial-cum-administrative activities for teachers more generally' (p. 94), and that the 'practising manager' who teaches as well as managing is less common. This analysis is drawn from a review of a number of studies, mainly in primary schools employing less than 30 staff, following the introduction of local management of schools as a consequence of the 1988 Education Reform Act. Although there are dangers in extrapolating this analysis to FE colleges, it was the 1988 Act which began the changes in FE which culminated in the 1992 F&HE Act. The introduction of more independent management in FE colleges following incorporation seems to have produced similar changes to those in schools. At Westland College the lists of staff in the college handbooks show an increase from 1992 in the number of academic staff whose role is 'performance management' rather than teaching, and an increase in support staff whose role is related to funding.

Looking particularly at FE, Randle and Brady (1997) claim that these developments in FE have produced a 'new type of FE manager operating with a conflicting value system to that of teachers' (p. 237). Their research was based on interviews and a lecturer questionnaire carried out in a large FE college from 1994 to 1995. They saw conflicting paradigms emerging, where lecturers were concerned with the primacy of student learning, loyalty to students and colleagues, and academic standards. In contrast managerial concerns were about 'student through-put, income generation, loyalty to the organisation and achieving a balance between efficiency and effectiveness' (p. 232). It is not clear how many of the 400 lecturers in the college responded to the questionnaire. Senior managers considered that staff were reluctant to change and resisted the introduction of new techniques, while 68% of the staff responding thought 'they had a loss of control over their teaching process' (p.237). Elliott and Crossley (1997) similarly maintain that there 'is a fundamental difference between lecturers and senior managers over the definition of quality, value and improvement', (p. 89), which they see as underpinned by the lecturers' 'cultural and ideological assumptions and dispositions', (p. 90). In their case study in a

large urban college, which they acknowledge was limited, they found that the lecturers' 'real and deeply held orientation to a student-linked pedagogy' led to a withdrawal of 'goodwill' and a lack of support for 'quantitative performance indicators' (p. 89). Walker and Green (2001) also maintain that there is an ethical or possibly non-ethical dilemma central to the erosion of professional ideals within the further education sector leading to conflict over roles and responsibilities for staff. Professional ideals in FE include a concern for students. Managers might argue that their concern with outputs and attainment is driven by their concern for student interests. However, the work reviewed appears to show a discontinuity between the lecturers who take account of individual student interests or needs and managers concerned with institutional objectives which supersede the interests of individual student. This apparent division is discussed further below.

In terms of the FE curriculum, Hyland (2000) points out that the managerialist approach has led to the 'vocationalisation of post-compulsory education, so that the "economistic" purposes of learning are given pride of place to the detriment of the broader social and cultural functions of state systems,' (p. 119). Esland, *et al* (1999), in forming a typology of cost-driven managerial processes, argue that outcomes arising from this view will include competences, qualification targets and completion rates. Young and Lucas (1999) warn that there is a danger that the 'emancipatory purposes of learning' may become lost 'in the increasing emphasis on targets and qualifications' (p. 101) and describe a new 'approach to learning and pedagogy' that 'calls into question any precise specification of learning outcomes' (p. 112). It should be noted that the phrase 'learning outcomes' is used in a variety of places with different meanings: from qualifications to the specific aims of individual lessons. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act led to the introduction of a funding mechanism that was intended to be transparent and eventually, to bring convergence in funding between the different types of colleges. As noted earlier, Esland, *et al* (1999) consider that the new system made the introduction of business models for college management inevitable.

In FE the need for qualifications for funding purposes gave impetus to the

growth of the Open College Network (OCN) which now validates many Access courses, and to the revalidation, as described elsewhere, of the college Access courses in a modular form, enabling 'partial completion' to be claimed. The use of OCN validated courses with subsequent certification allows quantitative performance indicators for retention, completion and achievement to be applied. Here we see evidence of the first three of Randle and Brady's (1997) characteristics: strict financial management, efficient use of resources and performance indicators.

One manifestation of this managerialism is increasing bureaucratisation leading to increased administration. This is illustrated by the increase in paperwork for students and staff during my time in FE. When I began in 1988, one slip of paper was completed by hand when part-time students enrolled. By 1996 enrolment was done via computer, but the students had also to complete an induction questionnaire. In addition for full-time students an indemnity form, health declaration form and a qualifications form were required. For all students involved in courses validated by the local Open College Network (including Access students) a further registration form was required. Copies of the student charter and college regulations and safety rules were issued, together with a form to say they had been read and agreed. Finally each student had to complete an induction checklist or 'Individual Learning Agreement' to say that the above forms had been received and that appropriate guidance had been given. Extra paperwork for staff resulted from the introduction of course quality assurance procedures. As I showed in a small scale investigation for a previous Open University course, students and staff alike found the resulting paper chase frustrating, echoing the findings of Elliott and Crossley (1997). As the course proceeded computerised registers were taken and detailed records of student withdrawals and transfers kept. All tutorials were noted in writing, even if only brief meetings in a corridor, and action plans were drawn up where necessary for student or course issues. Minutes were required for all meetings with identification of people responsible for actions. At the end of the course staff completed further forms for certification, and finally staff had to record retention numbers and achievement and analyse these against targets and benchmarks. This is a

paper trail for audit purposes which is more detailed and extensive than that required to assess student progress. So here too there are links to Randle and Brady's (1997) characteristics, in the monitoring of performance indicators.

Performance indicators as management tools can be viewed merely as fulfilling the requirements of funding bodies. However, it can also be argued, as in the case of the English school sector, that these performance indicators represent the interest of consumers, that is, in this case, the interest of students. It might be argued that a managerial discourse focusing on performance, accountability and outcomes seeks to provide a more precise means through which student interests can be represented. In this view performance indicators allow potential students to evaluate courses and make decisions about what courses and or colleges best serve their needs; and issues of retention and achievement become issues to be addressed institutionally rather than being addressed at the level of the individual students and their needs. So a managerial discourse which focuses on performance indicators can claim to provide more precise means through which student interests can be represented. However, as will be shown later, the public presentation of data is ambiguous and does not always provide a good means of comparing courses or colleges. In a previous study I found that for Access courses it was personal recommendation from friends or college staff that was often the determining factor in choosing a course.

The emergence of a 'business' approach which emphasises quantitative outcomes in FE, and the public sector in general, is a common theme of the literature discussed above. So it would appear that criteria for success emerging from a New Managerialism perspective will be closely related to quantitative performance indicators such as enrolment, retention and achievement. Consideration of these and other quantitative indicators was thus an important part of this research, to answer the main research question 'In what ways are Access courses 'successful'?', in examining the perspectives from which success can be viewed, and the criteria by which they can be judged.

Two views: the liberal/humanist tradition

A second strand of educational purpose through with the interests of students can be articulated rests with the s-called liberal/humanist tradition. Taylor (1996) points out that in education ‘the liberal tradition is an ideologically contested concept’ covering ‘a wide spectrum of views and practices’, (p. 62). At one end is an over-riding belief in individual self-development and at the other, a belief in a social purpose, whether from a democratic socialist or a Marxist viewpoint. He considers that while the central tenet of liberal ideology is individualism, there is also a commitment to democratic practice through a questioning attitude, involvement in society and a dialectical form of teaching. Usher and Edwards (1996) also agree that definition is difficult, but identify learning for its own sake without certification, personal development, confidence-building and the redressing of disadvantage as common themes. There is also some debate about where liberal adult education occurs: can it happen in institutions as well as in the community? Field (1991) suggests it can and does. Thompson (1996) suggests that the tradition is biased towards the white, middle-aged and male, and ignores working class people, women and ethnic minority groups. Access courses stem from attempts to involve some of these groups in the educational system, (Fieldhouse, *et al*, 1996; Jarvis, 1995).

Usher and Edwards (1996) suggest that liberal adult education can be described as ‘oppressively elitist and patriarchal’ (p. 39). Jarvis (1995) points to another issue, maintaining that as education itself is humanistic, and therefore as ‘a process of human interaction in which both sets of participants should be affected, it cannot be a neutral process. Indeed it is a moral one!’ (p. 143). The interaction between lecturers and students requires lecturers to exercise professionalism based on ethical values in development of the curriculum on offer and the dialogue which ensues. Jarvis (1995) also points out that Illich and Freire, while not disputing the humanistic perspective, place their analyses of education in a wider, more radical context.

Lawson (2000) suggests that a tension exists within the liberal tradition in education as elsewhere, between the expression of individuality and the need for government. Liberal education ‘seeks to be open and value-free, but values are necessary in that choices might be meaningful and deemed rational’ (Lawson, 2000, p. 36). Without government there is no framework within which to deliver the desired education. This in part reflects many of the tensions in the delivery of Access courses.

McMahon’s (1997) assertion that there are non-monetary benefits of lifelong learning suggests another aspect of the liberal/humanist discourse: learning is not simply for instrumental monetary reasons. Plewis and Preston (2001) in a comprehensive discussion of ways of evaluating lifelong learning also suggest that both quantitative and qualitative methods are needed for the evaluation of learning, which take into account long term, non-monetary and external factors. They list amongst other factors, reduction of poverty and crime, more efficient household management, curiosity and educational reading and knowledge dissemination. They have attempted to classify these benefits at ‘individual, family, community, organisational and macroeconomic level’ (Plewis and Preston, 2001, p. 37). The majority of these are not considerations which are reflected in ‘official’ course aims at a governmental or institutional level. This wider view of the benefits of learning is in many ways a reflection of the aims of liberal education: effectively an increase in the quality of individual life experienced through learning. It is such outcomes that a liberal discourse of education seeks to embrace.

This liberal tradition can be linked to the student-centred approach of many Access courses. Jarvis (1995) links the development of Access courses to the growth of Open College Networks. This may be the case in the northwest, as Jarvis discusses, but in the northeast of England the validation of Access courses was originally quite separate from local Open Colleges Networks, being centred on two of the local universities, and the main growth of the local OCN has been since 1992. Wilkinson (1999) characterises Access courses as having a liberal commitment to providing equal opportunities in

addition to their strength in being able to adapt to local needs. Coare and Thomson's work (1996) gives evidence of this commitment and local variation. Included are excerpts from Access students writing about their personal development and career improvement, characteristics of the aims of liberal education. All the diaries were submitted in response to a request from the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and are therefore an opportunistic sample. There is no significant analysis of the extracts. However, in the second part of the book the diary extracts are selected by themes, some of which are explored later in this work. The work by Munn, *et al* on the Scottish Wider Access Programme (1994) also suggested that liberal/humanist views underpinned the work of the staff involved in that particular programme.

Criteria of success derived from the liberal/humanist tradition discussed above include personal development, confidence and career improvement. These are harder to define and also to measure than those discussed in the previous section, as 'softer' factors are necessarily more subjective. Not only are they subjective but they are also not constant, changing with time, personal circumstances and employment opportunities. Nor are these concepts clearly defined. Despite this, criteria derived from this tradition form an important part of any review of Access courses, as the literature discussed above suggests. Therefore an examination of such criteria is necessary to answer the research questions. These areas were explored in detail from a student perspective during the research.

The focus on personal development and other softer factors discussed in the literature above demonstrates that the liberal/humanist tradition seeks to represent student interests but approaches this from a different perspective from the managerial discourse. However, they are not necessarily opposed: managers do recognise that students need more than qualifications and lecturers do want students to pass. Within a post-1992 FE framework both liberal/humanist and managerial discourses thus struggle to place Access courses within the overall purpose of FE, and struggle to define and characterise student interest, although they do not explore the student perspective to any great extent.

However, just as ‘success’ is a contested notion so is ‘student interests’. Does this phrase mean merely those topics which students are interested in? Or does it mean the needs and wants of students or ‘needs and interests’ as discussed by Hirst and Peters (1970)? Hirst and Peters contrast a valuative notion of interests which is concerned with ‘what is *in* the child’s interests’ (p. 36) with a psychological notion which has ‘motivational relevance’ (p. 37). If the valuative notion is chosen, who determines these interests: managers who may perceive these needs and wants only in terms of the easily quantifiable factors discussed above, or liberal/humanists with a more democratic, if paternalistic, view? Or the students themselves? As noted earlier, it could be argued that publishing performance indicators serves student interests by helping students decide which courses meet their needs: but there is a danger in this approach of assuming that the requirements identified by managers (or funding bodies) are the same as the requirements identified by students. On the other hand, the liberal/humanist approach might claim that to have a greater concern for student interests in terms of what is important to individual students. However, this approach runs the risk of ignoring the wider context and consequences of undertaking particular courses of study. Students may not appreciate these wider consequences, but as indicated above they are important for the continuing presentation of course. In considering the research questions, all the perspectives of all parties concerned had to be explored.

Conclusion

Although the two strands of managerialism and liberal/humanism identified above have been used as a framework within which the differing discourses emerging in this study will be analysed, it should be understood that the two strands are more complex than mere polarisation. While the two strands can be summarised as in table 2.1 below, this is a crude polarisation: as noted in the introduction the same senior college managers each autumn celebrate the achievement of past students while preventing new presentations of the same courses because of low numbers. And the lecturing staff review poor statistics from the previous year, while assuring prospective student of the

life-enhancing prospects the courses offer. So while the liberal/humanist discourse has a greater emphasis on process, and the managerial discourse has an emphasis on outcomes, these dichotomies obscure complexities in an over-simplified typology and, in analysis, more complex patterns emerge. In practice, aspects of each discourse will be drawn upon.

Table 2.1 Comparison of managerialist and liberal/humanist perspectives as applied to Access courses

	Managerialism	Liberal/humanism
Dominant aim	economic development of country and organisation, needs of employers	development of individual, increase in quality of life
Delivery mechanism	outcome-based, transmission	discussion, process
Course for whom?	those who can achieve qualification	everyone
Assumed student attitudes	pursuit of accreditation	desire to learn
Course judged by	performance indicators enrolment, retention, achievement	development of students, student progression
Why valued?	economic good, efficiency	provides education for all and opportunity for change

Hammersley’s (1992) assertion that ‘in epistemology as in methodology, dichotomies obscure the range of options open to us’ (p. 171) could indeed be applied throughout this research. This brief review of literature relevant to this research project suggests that while there are some clear perspectives on aspects of the project, such as adult education, managerialism and the liberal, humanistic tradition in education, there is much more diversity of perspective on FE in general and Access courses in particular. There is little agreement about the role, nature and purpose of these courses in FE, and less agreement about what is meant by 'success', for the sector generally or for Access course in particular. The two perspectives identified dominate the literature. While there are some attempts to offer other ways of considering success, there is not enough room to explore them in this work. Gleeson and Shain (1999) maintain that for professionals in FE there is a need to understand that FE is occupied by competing visions and cultures

intimately connected with wider social and economic change ' (p. 467):
visions and culture are however different to the concept of discourse.
Nevertheless vision and culture are derived from discourse.

There are clear tensions between, for example, indicators of success based on performance measured by statistics, and those based on individual student outcomes, which are harder to measure. While some attention is paid to student expectations of courses, there is little discussion of the extent to which student interests are analysed or served. So managerial and liberal/humanist discourses are not dichotomies, but resources upon which people draw in expressing their own views of what constitutes success.

The main success criteria that emerge from the literature discussed above are progression, preparation for HE, employment, wider perspectives, civic participation, confidence, on-course support and personal development. As discussed later, these are not equally weighted. But what about the students? While they want qualifications they have other perspectives too. Calder (1993) lists as learner criteria: pleasure, costs, usefulness and quality. But some of these criteria are unclear, for example, quality.

While all the themes are relevant to the main research question, relating the themes to the subsidiary questions is more complex. Personal development and confidence are important for the question concerning further study but also relate to student understanding and differing perspectives. Preparation for HE is obviously important for further study but is of no importance to those who did not go to HE. So relating the themes to individual questions is a complex matter to be addressed later. Not all the themes emerging from the literature could be investigated in this research. Some such as 'efficacy' were too complex for the limited nature of this research, both in terms of the analysis of complex variables and the number of students involved. Nor could themes which involved considerable time scales be included. Some of the themes, such as economic progression and confidence, emerged from interviews as well as literature, and ones such as these, which could be clearly related to the research questions, are the main emphasis of this research. There is a spectrum of success criteria which goes beyond the

outcome-based managerialist discourse and reaches towards the more process-based liberal/humanist discourse, and like any spectrum has elements that overlap. These criteria are derived from the discourse of education, through the determination of student interests, thereby defining the purpose and the ways of working of FE.

Although Gleeson and Shain (1999) noted the need for middle managers to understand that FE has competing visions and cultures, their statement applies equally to students enrolling in a college in the same context of social and economic change, and to those wishing to research the effects of the changes on students and their courses. So this study of success in FE must take account of competing discourses, of social and economic factors, and of other factors also. How this is to be done will be discussed in the next chapter.

Introduction

From the start, I was aware that my position as an insider in Westland College and the small scale of the study would raise methodological issues. However, as the research progressed, it became clear that an ethnographically informed approach provided a way of resolving these issues. Firstly, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) claim that ‘everyone is a participant observer, acquiring knowledge about the social world in the course of participating in it’ (p. 125), and that by ‘systematically exploiting our participation in the settings under study as researchers, we can produce accounts of the social world and justify them without placing reliance on futile appeals to empiricism, of either positivist or naturalist varieties’ (p.21). In a previous text, in describing participant observation, they say that

all social research is a form of participant observation, because we cannot study the social world without being part of it. From this point of view participant observation is not a particular research technique but a mode of being-in-the world characteristic of researchers.
(Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994, p.249).

These extracts reflect my own position very neatly: the participation itself raises research questions, and through my knowledge of the establishment and courses I have a stronger base for analysis of the context.

Secondly ethnography provides ways of looking at the validity of small-scale research. Hammersley (1998) proposes three steps for assessing the validity of ethnographic claims: plausibility, credibility, and reviewing the evidence itself, in addition to its relevance. This research is small scale, but it is anticipated that an in-depth approach will allow the drawing of theoretical inferences, and that viewed against the criteria outlined above it

will be considered to have validity. I will return to these criteria in the conclusion to the research.

Thirdly, the research employs mixed methods, combining quantitative analysis of records with qualitative interviews. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) maintain that mixed methods are often a matter of pragmatism, 'used as a matter of course' (p. 5). They suggest that it is often appropriate within different phases of a research process to combine quantitative and qualitative methods. From the ethnographic perspective Hammersley and Atkinson (op. cit.) support this, arguing that there is 'no escape from reliance on common-sense knowledge and methods of investigation' (p. 21), which may indeed be a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Although ethnographic research has its roots in anthropology (Tedlock, 2000), its field has widened to encompass other disciplines including sociology and education. Within these disciplines different methods have been developed with different styles of reporting. Coffey, *et al* (1996) suggest that while most ethnographic research provides 'thick' descriptions, 'thin' descriptions are also possible when a realist approach is adopted. Although this research has been reported using a 'thinner' descriptive approach, the detail which is provided comes from a deep knowledge and observation of the case considered, and it is Hammersley's (1998) methods for validity which have been applied. It is for this reason that I suggest that this is an ethnographically informed case study rather than a fuller ethnography.

New ethnographic approaches to research are generally characterised by analysis of particular cases. Bassey (1999) claims that in 25 years of examining part-time teachers' research, each study he has examined 'has been a study of a singularity, i.e. research into particular events rather than general events, this being virtually the only form of research possible for those who are working at it part-time and with very limited resources' (p.5). It is thus not surprising that this research should be a case study. However, what constitutes this 'case' and how it developed and is reported needs further explanation.

Bassey (1999) characterises educational case studies as empirical enquiries which have boundaries of 'space and time', are 'interesting', and are carried out 'in order to inform the judgements and decisions of practitioners or policy-makers' (p. 58). The researcher necessarily has to make judgements about the boundaries and interest of the case. However, Merriam (1998) considers that although the 'term *case-study* is familiar to most people there is little agreement on just what constitutes case-study research' (p.1, italics in original). She considers that 'case study' is a 'design' that can cover a range of disciplinary and philosophical perspectives, and as such is useful for understanding educational settings. Yin (2003), however, considers case study to be an 'all-encompassing method' (p. 14) which can include both qualitative and quantitative research. Stake (2000) considers that 'case-study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied' (p. 435). As noted earlier case studies are necessarily bounded and the drawing of bounds is an issue. Also inferences rather than generalisations tend to be drawn depending on the level of detail and insider knowledge of relevant data sources. Merriam (1998) warns that authors of case studies need to be particularly aware of bias: an issue which this research has tried to address by careful triangulation as described later. Stake (2000) suggests that three types of case studies can be identified: intrinsic, instrumental and collective. According to his typology the present study is an 'intrinsic' study: one undertaken to explore a particular case for better understanding. So in this particular intrinsic case study, the case studied comprises the Access courses in one department of one college over a defined period of time, using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods.

The debate on qualitative and quantitative research is well documented (Miles and Huberman, 1994, Brannen, 1992). Bird (1992) suggests that often research can be aided when both qualitative and quantitative methods are employed interactively in testing hypotheses developed from analytic induction. So in this research the information from quantitative data could be tested against ideas arising from the qualitative interviews. West (1995) maintains that some qualitative methods can provide 'profounder insights into human motives' (p. 133) than quantitative methods. Thus it was hoped

that the semi-structured interviews would provide a wider perspective from which success criteria could be drawn, particularly from the student viewpoint. This chapter will now look at the debate concerning qualitative and quantitative research in education and the implications for this work, before turning to the methods used in this research.

Quantitative and qualitative research in education

The educational research of the early twentieth century was mainly empirical quantitative research, directed towards a study of educational problems and school effectiveness. In a formal sense it emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was firmly based initially on empirical scientific method. Its development coincided with the rise of developmental psychology, and it was also strongly influenced by the new mathematical tool of statistics. Much of the influential educational research from this period such as that of Binet (see de Landsheere, 1988) was based on large scale testing and observation.

There were historically four main strands to quantitative research in education. The first was psychological. This type of research was most firmly based on the ideal of experimental method. Intelligence tests were developed to measure students' characteristics and attainment, and observational schedules to quantify the behaviour of students and teachers. Secondly research from a sociological perspective was also quantitatively based, although not experimental. This type often used official statistics and surveys. Both these types of research looked for causal relationships. Thirdly there was a great interest in school effectiveness from a quantitative perspective. This had its roots in surveys from the United States. One of the major British studies of this type was *Fifteen Thousand Hours* (Rutter *et al*, 1979), a longitudinal study of children in 12 London secondary schools. This large scale study was mainly funded by the Inner London Education Authority, whose co-operation was essential in such a large scale research exercise. The last major area of influence is that of quantitative educational evaluation. Again many of the British projects were large scale and funded by major organisations such as the Schools Council. By 1970, however, the

emphasis had shifted more strongly to qualitative approaches. using ethnographic techniques of observation, such as that described graphically by Shipman, *et al* (1974) in *Inside a curriculum project* which looked at the Keele Humanities Project. This research was sponsored by the independent Nuffield Foundation.

The arguments in favour of quantitative educational research focus mainly on its rigorous nature based on its objectivity, reflecting its roots in empirical science and an objectivist epistemology. By quantifying events, progress and learning by assigning to them ranking or scaling, measurements can be made, variables controlled and causal relationships determined. The research will be reproducible and generalisations can be made. Statistical methods are frequently employed and the advent of sophisticated computer programmes has greatly enhanced the analysis of data. The information which is acquired contributes to the general body of knowledge in the subject, and can then be used by practitioners to inform and improve practice, and by those in power to shape policy. In relation to this study, such information is represented through statistics of retention and achievement of the Access courses.

The first main argument against quantitative research is that its view of reality is mechanistic and reductionist, 'which, by definition, excludes methods of choice, freedom, individuality and moral responsibility' (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p. 22). The second is that research based on measurement will tend to focus on the banal and trivial, merely because these are easily measurable. The predominance in assessment of tests of recall, rather than the higher cognitive skills of analysis and synthesis, is an illustration of this. Not everything can be identified and quantified, and by concentrating on those factors which can be measured easily, complex factors such as human behaviour may be ignored. This leads on to the next argument which says that research of this type ignores our ability as humans to interpret our experiences, represent them to ourselves and act upon them to change the context. The implied objectivity of the researcher using quantitative approaches is also a matter of doubt: all researchers have their own framework of beliefs and these will inevitably affect their choice of

questions and interpretations (Hammersley, 1992, 1998). Hence, qualitative researchers question the validity of the knowledge gained, and insist on the need to observe and understand natural situations and be reflexive about those interpretations, rather than simply measure them. Other criticisms focus on the link between the body of knowledge which constitutes theory and the application of this knowledge to practice and policy making: to what extent can theory developed on the basis of quantitative data gathered in one context be generalised and applied in a different context (Hammersley, 2002)?

The argument that quantitative research can be trivialising is amply illustrated by the publishing of performance league tables for schools. These present quantitative data which are properly part of management information. However, they have been presented as evidence of improvement in standards, or otherwise, having been accepted at face value without supporting analysis and research. Also these data have been criticised as trivialising school achievements by concentrating on outcomes, as they do not take into account factors such as intake and school location. Criticisms have not only come from qualitative researchers, but also from quantitative researchers such as Carol FitzGibbon, director of the Advanced Level Information Service (ALIS) at Durham University. In a discussion at the British Association meeting in Newcastle in September 1995, she maintained that there are quantitative methods available now which can measure and allow for prior achievement and background, as well as teaching methods. Some attempt has been made to address this in school performance data by the inclusion in the latest tables of 'value-added' data; and quantitative data can be used for liberal/humanist agenda such as the monitoring of equal opportunities. It has to be said however that the first ALIS reports, which were initially presented in confidence only to contributing establishments, were not easy to read or understand, and training had to be given in their interpretation. Qualitative researchers criticise quantitative researchers' search for causal links. However they themselves sometimes make apparently causal claims based on assertions about correlations or patterns emerging from their data. This approach pays less attention to the careful control of variables which characterises

quantitative research such as that of ALIS. Such approaches have yet to be developed in relation to statistics on Access and other post-16 courses

One of the major criticisms by qualitative researchers of quantitative research is that differences in interpretative frameworks between the tester and person tested can invalidate quantitative research (The Open University, 1996). Some misgivings about both understanding of language and context were revealed in the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) reports on children and science. Great differences in children's understanding of practical situations, such as electrical circuits, were discovered when the same information was presented in a diagrammatic form, and then with actual circuit components. Misunderstanding about definitive words such as 'food' and 'plant' were also revealed in later research by the Children's Learning in Science Group (CLIS). Both the APU and CLIS findings are described in Driver, *et al* (1994). Both studies were quantitative, but looked in depth at the area of common interpretation of test materials. They show that the problem of different frameworks is recognised and can be addressed. In this research the problem appears in the need to explore different interpretations of success concealed within the quantitative data.

Measurement and banality are not the only problems. Knowledge in social sciences concerns concepts apparently familiar to a layperson: families or crime, for example. In the natural sciences, knowledge appears more distant: black holes, wave-particle duality. Thus the 'truths that the social scientist discovers often strike the layperson as things the latter already knew, but dressed up in new jargon' (Ruben 1998, p.421). But in both social and natural sciences concepts are complex, and the precise definitions of apparently familiar words in both discourses do not always coincide with their everyday usage. There are arguments too about the logic of quantitative research; for example, the assumption that understanding can be achieved by finding causal relationships from quantitative research. Critics suggest that the perceived causal relations may be simplistic. It is generally assumed that quantitative researchers, who work from an experimental basis, have a hypothesis, set out to test it, and hence produce a body of knowledge. Qualitative researchers on the other hand prefer not to have

prior perspectives but to investigate human behaviour in naturalistic settings, as Shipman did by observing meetings (op. cit.). The view that quantitative research necessarily starts from a hypothesis is a limited one, however, and ignores the much wider types of research which now take place. Indeed historically hypotheses have not always preceded data collection. Darwin's theory of evolution came from his observations on his voyage on *The Beagle*, not following a preconceived hypothesis. Newton's Theory of Gravitation came after the collection of data by researchers such as Brahe and Kepler. In the last century Einstein's explanation of gravity in his General Theory of Relativity could be said to be an alternative interpretation based on the same data that Newton had used. It can also be argued that Einstein's Theory was a philosophical analysis. More recent quantitative researchers have been more cautious about the relationship between data and interpretation: for example ALIS, presented data initially without extensive interpretation, which was left to the institutions that were funding the surveys. This approach leads to the use of, and more dialogue between, different approaches to research and provides a basis for the mixed methods adopted here.

The argument about logic goes further, however, and questions are raised as to whether the objectivity sought after by quantitative researchers is at all achievable. Eisner (The Open University, 1996, p.21) argues that to show that accounts of phenomena are truly independent of the researcher is impossible, as we must have direct access to the area of reality being represented. This is necessary to check the correspondence of the representation produced by research with reality. Phillips (1993) takes issue with this. He maintains that the crucial test of the objectivity of quantitative or qualitative research is the 'critical spirit in which it has been carried out' (Phillips, 1993, p. 71). However once again, but in a different context, there appears to be a lack of a shared framework from which to understand each other. Eisner is attacking only one form of objectivity, that based on naive realism, and there are other philosophies of science. Researchers using quantitative approaches may themselves approach their findings from a position of ordered scepticism, that is, the findings are assumed to be fallible – they are the best representation of knowledge until proven

otherwise. In physics the accepted theory of matter and forces known as the Standard Model is a current example of this: there are known discrepancies but it is the best model available.

Qualitative researchers have claimed that quantitative research is often divorced from practice; that the accumulation of a body of knowledge does not necessarily influence the practitioners in the field (Scott, 2000, Mortimore, 1999). Some of this criticism is directed at quantitative researchers' emphasis on outcomes rather than processes. A narrow concentration on outcomes is said to ignore social interactions and hence miss important but unexpected issues which are important for practice. In addition the narrow focus on outcomes can mean that changes in practice do not emerge. One version of the engineering model, on which these criticisms generally focus, is seen as technical knowledge divorced from professional skill and wisdom (The Open University, 1996, pp. 23f.) To meet this problem in this research, quantitative data on outcomes had to be assessed in the light of different understandings of desirable outcomes offered by different groups such as managers, lecturers and students.

Educational research initially followed the natural sciences in striving to be objective, often seeing them as being based on realism, positivism and a deterministic view of human nature and a nomothetic approach. Qualitative research is much more subjective, with nominalism, antipositivism, voluntarism and an idiographic approach as its basis. Although there had been a little qualitative research in early days, it was in the 1970s that significant educational research of this type re-emerged. Qualitative critics of quantitative research usually focus on research which is in the logical positivist school of science. Logical positivism has been described as 'an extreme form of empiricism according to which theories are not only justified by the extent to which they can be verified by an appeal to facts acquired through observation, but are considered to have meaning only insofar as they can be so derived' (Chalmers, 1978, p. xv). If quantitative methods in educational research are narrowly limited to facts, then a great deal of the criticism of this branch of research has substance. But scientists have different views of science, and it can be argued that many scientific

advances do not take place in the way that Chalmers describes. As well as the examples of Newton, Einstein and Darwin mentioned earlier, more modern discoveries have happened in ways removed from this model. Joyce Bell Burnell's discovery of new astronomical bodies came from the 'noise' in her data; the discovery of three dimensional medical imaging during a walk. In the schools of thought of Popper and Kuhn (Richards, 1987), creativity and insight play a part in scientific method. Scientific knowledge, while supported by facts, is seen to move on in different ways from that described as logical positivism.

As has been shown quantitative research is not only factual but can bring insight and creativity. The conclusion to *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, says

Our discussion of school processes has been guided by knowledge stemming from previous research, informal observations of twelve schools over three years, and numerous helpful suggestions from the teaching staff in those twelve schools with whom we have discussed our findings. However, necessarily a certain amount of imagination has been involved in making the difficult step from tables, figures and graphs to suggestions of a kind likely to be helpful in the everyday life of a school.
(Rutter, *et al*, 1979 p.205).

This description (which is not very different in the end from Shipman's qualitative methods) of the informal gathering of information, and the need for the application of imagination in a quantitative research project, supports my view that what is required in good research is a judicial mixture of the best of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Good research of any kind, however, depends on the questions asked.

There must also be an acknowledgement, as I have tried to show, that quantitative research should not, and in fact does not, rigidly adhere to the extreme form of empiricism advocated by logical positivists. The relationship between theory and practice will remain, of necessity, a matter

of political negotiation between researchers, practitioners and those in power, but the value of good research lies in what can be learnt from the research, irrespective of its methods. As Phillips says, 'neither subjectivity or objectivity has an exclusive stranglehold on truth' (op. cit. p.61).

Although there are different types of qualitative research, just as there are quantitative types, the main characteristics they have in common are the focus on the in-depth description of settings, an interest in the varying perspectives of actors within settings, an emphasis on process and an inductive method of analysis, in which theory is generated from data. Because theory is generated from data which are related to particular situations there are issues of validity and reliability, compounded by the essential role and of the researcher in the collection, selection and analysis of data. In qualitative research it is unlikely that there will be a control group, as in quantitative research. Repetition of an observation or replication of circumstances are not usually possible. Thus, criticism of qualitative research centres on issues of validity and reliability, along with the effect of the explicit role of the researcher and generalisability. These issues need careful consideration in case studies and all will be discussed later in the context of this research.

As already noted the research described here can be considered to have a broad ethnographic framework. It provides an insider view of Access courses over a period of time, looking particularly at the student perspective, drawing on quantitative and qualitative data. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) argue that reflexivity in working with 'what knowledge we have, while recognising that it may be erroneous and subjecting it to systematic inquiry where doubt seems justified' (p.15) is a strength of the ethnographic approach. The effects of the researcher are not eliminated but recognised and attempts are made to understand them. Thus the researcher role is explicit rather than implicit, which seems to be consistent with the role of an insider in the case study context.

The explicit role of the researcher, which would be seen as a form of bias by positivists, becomes a means of providing validity for ethnographic

research. Altheide and Johnson (1994) argue that the reflexive nature of ethnographical research, alongside a delineation of the 'context, researcher, methods setting, and actors' (p. 491) provides this means. Thus the three criteria outlined by Hammersley (1998) namely plausibility, credibility and reviewing the evidence, and relevance, can be answered by examination of the detail provided in the research.

This study uses an ethnographical framework to examine the case of three Access to HE courses. Interviews were used to collect data and are analysed qualitatively. This analysis is combined with quantitative analysis of existing data from college and course records, and comparing these to LBOCN data. This study therefore uses mixed methods using a participant observer framed within an interpretivist ethnographic methodology. Hammersley (1992), commenting on practitioner ethnography, suggests that an insider

will have usually have long-term experience of the setting being studied, and will therefore know its history at first hand as well as other information that may be required to understand what is going on. It would take an outsider a long time to collect such knowledge (p. 144).

The expectation was that my experience of the setting would assist in the interpretation of the data, and the mixture of methods would enable me to explore the extent to which the quantitative data provide a robust basis for identifying success factors or would raise question about the assumptions embedded in that data.

As it is essential for the practitioner in such circumstances to maintain 'a judicious combination of involvement and estrangement' (op. cit. p.145), it was considered that the careful combination of qualitative and quantitative methods described below would provide sufficient estrangement for the research to be considered worthwhile.

Theoretical perspectives

The main research question, ‘In what ways are Access courses ‘successful’?’ was addressed within the framework of the two discourses identified in chapter two, using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data.

From the managerialist perspective, where quantitative data plays an important part in the discourse, a primarily objectivist epistemology underlies the interpretation of the data. There is an assumption that the ‘real world’ is represented accurately by statistics, and consequently that ‘criteria of success’ can be derived from statistics. However, as will be shown, the data is not robust so an element of subjectivity is required in the objectivist epistemology in the interpretation of the data. This subjectivity becomes evident in the use of statistics by different groups, such as managers, course teams and students, and the interpretations placed upon them. Hence the research question on criteria of success also asks about perspective.

The liberal/humanist perspective gives greater weight to subjective data, relying on a mainly constructivist epistemology. The views of staff and students change over time and with changing contexts. Students start courses with particular goals, but over time their views may change, and even if initial goals are not achieved, they may still view the course as ‘successful’. Staff may hold liberal/humanist views, seeing ‘success’ in the development of the students, but recognise the demands of the managerial discourse for ‘objective’ measurement of success. These variations in staff and student views are focused in the research questions about different understandings and changes in perspectives.

The use in this research of a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data recognises the implicit theoretical epistemologies of the two discourses, but also allows for the use of alternative epistemologies in practice. If students’ understanding of ‘success’ is influenced by both discourses, and contains both objective and subjective elements, a constructivist approach is required to give full weight to the views of students, and to answer such questions as

‘What is the student understanding of success, and do different students have different perspectives?’ and ‘Are there changes in student perspectives over time?’. My participant observer status with its assumptions of relating to ‘matters of intersubjectivity and communication’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 9) allowed such a constructivist approach, drawing on knowledge of courses and people (student, staff, managers, moderators). Nevertheless, as the research is located in the ‘real world’, it must take into account the limitations of the available data and relate student and staff perspectives to the perspectives of managers and funding bodies.

Being a participant observer, also allowed to some extent examination of the differences between subjects’ statements of their beliefs and intentions and the activities they undertook or actions they carried out. It must be borne in mind however that attributing beliefs and intentions on the basis of observed activity necessarily requires subjective judgement by the observer, and as Argyris and Schön (1974) suggest, ‘professional competence requires development of one’s own continuing theory of practice’ (p. 7).

My first degree is in physics and, having taught the subject and examined this scientific discipline for a large number of years, my initial inclination on designing an Ed. D. research project was for a quantitatively based topic. Although as I recognise and have argued earlier, the reality of the scientific position is more complex than the simple labels would suggest, my earlier training meant that I was most comfortable with quantitative methods. However it was clear that quantitative data alone would not yield the kind of insight that I was interested in, nor would merely extending the research by a questionnaire, and so the complex nature of the issues underlying the research question led to the mixture of epistemologies and methods described above.

Data collection and analysis

The investigation described here was thus a case study of one type of course in one establishment, and used, as stated earlier, a mixture of methods. This mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods was necessary to reflect the

different ideas of success emerging from the literature. Thus the managerialist emphasis on quantitative outcomes required a different approach from the liberal/humanist focus on ‘softer’ outcomes.

Four data collection methods were initially proposed for the complete study: (i) an analysis of college records, (ii) a postal questionnaire for past students, (iii) a longitudinal study of Access to Science students who took part in some earlier research and for whom there was existing qualitative material which could be reanalysed, and (iv) interviews with other selected students both from the current modular course and the preceding Access to Humanities course. In addition, discussion was to take place with staff who had been involved in the courses. The first stage of the research was to comprise an initial exploration of institutional data, material from the earlier study was to be re-examined, second interviews with the students from this study were to be carried out, and a first attempt at drawing up success criteria was to be made. It was also to be used as a trial for some of the methods to be used later. The proposed work is shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Proposed data collection and analysis

Stage 1	Exploration of college records Re-examination of data from earlier study of Access to Science students New interviews with students from this study Discussion with access course staff Initial attempt to identify themes and success criteria
Stage 2	Collection of further quantitative data Further longitudinal interviews with science students Interviews with students from current Access courses Continuing discussion with Access course staff

The data was to be analysed iteratively. Initial material was mainly descriptive. As it was collected the material, whether interview data or paper records, was analysed, coded and themes identified. These themes were then reviewed in subsequent data analysis: in second interviews it was possible to revisit earlier statements and probe these further in the light of identified themes. In new interviews, also, emerging themes could be explored. Throughout the analysis, it was important to be aware of bias. Careful triangulation was employed: ‘using multiple sources and modes of evidence’ (Huberman and Miles, 1994, p. 438). Strauss and Corbin (1990)

maintain that in some qualitative research ‘sampling’ cannot be determined’ (p.192). Indeed, as this was an ethnographically framed insider study, it was to be expected that data collection could not be precisely pre-determined. Thus, formal interviews with Access course staff, external examiners/moderators and university lecturers were also included as it became obvious that they too had important perspectives on Access courses and success. This is explained in more detail later.

Alternative methods of data collection were considered, however the research was limited in time and place, and by the bounds of the case. However, more use could have been made of the use of written questionnaires administered to current learners. It should be noted, however, that the views of learners change during and after courses, and that questions about preparation for HE would have been inappropriate in such questionnaires. A more highly resourced project could have compared courses in other colleges, although this would have changed the nature of the case. Also given more resources, more extensive interviewing could have been carried out and more extensive follow up of students after the end of their Access courses could have been attempted. Within the research, in retrospect, interviews with more senior staff should have been scheduled to explore the complexity of their position.

The first stage was completed in September 1999. In the second stage, further quantitative data were collected, and further interviews were conducted. In both stages quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Copies of the questionnaires used are in Appendix 1.

Both stages of the study involved me as an insider, which obviously has an influence on the study. As well as methodological issues, there are also ethical issues to consider as an insider. Hammersley (1998) in looking at the ethics of ethnographic research considers that it is essential to

weigh the importance and contribution of the research
against the likelihood of and seriousness of any harm (to the
people involved, to others, or to future access), against the

value of being honest, and against any infringement of people's privacy. (p. 141)

These are not easy considerations: in a small case study complete anonymity is very difficult to maintain. In the present research some collected material has not been used, particularly when individuals would be clearly identifiable. For example, where there was one tutor for a specialist subject during the whole period of the research, comments made about the teaching of that subject have only been included at a general rather than a specific level. At times interviewees asked that comments they made should be 'off the record'. In other cases, names, places and dates have been altered to maintain requested confidentiality, but honesty has been maintained throughout.

Bird (1992) worked as an insider and maintains that if an insider can employ an external frame of reference partiality can be avoided and objectivity obtained (p. 141). While an outsider might appear to have greater objectivity, an insider has advantages of access and trust, in-depth knowledge and insight, and hence there is a practical advantage to being an insider. This is of particular importance in the current atmosphere in FE. Although the fierce competitiveness induced by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act decreased as the change to Learning and Skills Councils approached, the secrecy noted by McGivney (1996) is still evident, and I was able as an insider to gain access to information about student retention and achievement rates that I might otherwise have been denied. In addition, as Brannen (1992) suggests, pragmatic factors 'play a part in determining methods' (p. 32). Being an insider also meant that I knew to some extent all the science students, and some of their backgrounds. As noted elsewhere, this could cause some problems, but Miles and Huberman (1994), in discussing the standards that are required in modern qualitative research, suggest that with the application of suitable queries, objectivity, reliability and authenticity can be obtained. In this case checks were made with third parties or alternative data sources to check analysis as far as possible using triangulation. In this way, for instance, I was able to check

whether in interviews, students were telling me what they wanted me to hear from our pre-existing relationship.

While the quantitative data from records in this study gave an outline picture of the courses and students, the qualitative data from interviews provided a different understanding. These can be used to point to the contrast between the managerialist perspective emphasising outcomes and the humanist perspectives of staff and students, but also suggest a more complex relationship. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that analysis of qualitative data through thematic analysis allows an emergence of what is relevant to an area. By interviewing students and looking at the background from which they came it was hoped that relevant themes would emerge from analysis and it would be possible to draw out success criteria to compare with those from the managerial data. Common themes did emerge, such as increased confidence and staff support. While West (1996) argues that biographical research helps to illustrate the educational progress of students, Stronach and MacLure (1997) warn that there are dangers in this type of work as biographies can have more than one interpretation, producing conflicting accounts. Although biographical life histories are in much more depth than the interviews used here, similar advantages and difficulties apply. However, Miller and Glassner (1997) suggest that what matters is 'how we can put them to honest and intelligent use' (p. 111). Peräkylä (1997) maintains that validity and reliability can be obtained in research of this type by 'assuring the accuracy of recordings and testing the truthfulness of analytical claims' (p. 216) by careful examination of recorded material and transcripts. This led me to return to the data again and again during the course of the study to review the themes and look for contrasting and confirmatory evidence as the analysis continued. A difficulty, as in all social science research without the perceived control of experimental design, was in isolating single variables in interview data (Hammersley, 2002) and relating them to themes.

A major limitation on this research was the time scale and framework of the Ed. D. As a part-time researcher with limited funds and time, it was not feasible either to increase the number of interviews nor the number of

courses explored. Given a longer time frame and full-time research status, or even recognised research time, it would have been possible to extend the scope of this study, using questionnaires and more interviews both with students and a wider range of others senior managers, external examiners/moderators and university lecturers. This might provide more detailed information about how well prepared students are for HE and provide information on trends over time. It would also have been possible to involve other providers of Access courses in the area, including some of those represented in the LBOCN survey, with the potential for a broader range of student backgrounds and interests. However, in extending the research in these ways, the insight of the observer would have been lost and the 'case' would have been changed. While this research is small-scale it is comparable in scale to other research in this field.

So this research attempted to provide validity and relevance (Hammersley, 1998) by comparing students from different cohorts and courses, triangulation of different data sources and honest accounting within one establishment. Checks for internal consistency of data were carried out by, for example, the comparison of the account of one student with another, and the student account with the staff or examiner account. This also made it possible to check for discrepancies between what people did as opposed to what they said they did i.e. theory in action as opposed to espoused theory (Argyris and Schön, 1974). These qualitative accounts were compared, where relevant, to statistical data. Where discrepancies did arise one source was checked against another, and where possible numerical data and interview accounts checked with other sources. The analysis of quantitative data in this study when added to the insights from qualitative work provide insight into success from a student perspective, which as Calder (1993) suggests is missing from outcome measures.

In concentrating on only one department in a particular college, this research is necessarily selective and small scale, and therefore the results are not easily generalisable. There is a debate about the concept of generalisability of qualitative research and case study research in particular (Schofield, 1993). However Schofield suggests that given sufficient information about

the context of the research some generalisation is possible. For this research, background information is given to enable others to make informed judgements. The project is inevitably personal but also illuminative of issues which others may wish to examine in similar contexts elsewhere. While an experimental or more extended longitudinal approach might yield data that would enable a more detailed analysis, it would not be possible given the short term and limited scale of this project. Hammersley (1998) suggests that there is always a 'trade-off between studying issues in depth or in breadth. Ethnography usually sacrifices the latter for the former' (p.11). However, he maintains that this prevents the risk of losing relevant information, which may happen in the case of a survey which sacrifices depth for breadth. In this case the nature of the project meant that depth rather than breadth was the major focus.

Interviewing was chosen as a major method of data collection because it allowed the possibility of greater depth of insight than a questionnaire, particularly if only small numbers of responses were likely from the latter. Holstein and Gubrium (1997) consider that interviews are a special form of conversation that are interactional, thus allowing the possibility of probing which is not possible in a questionnaire. In addition the interview allows for checks to be made for accuracy and understanding. However, this all depends on the skills of the interviewer, and in listening to tapes and reading transcripts I became aware of many occasions when I could have probed and clarified further. Sometimes when students were still around college after the initial interview this was possible; I was able to go back to probe further their perspectives on the outcomes of the Access course for them.

Interviews with students were semi-structured; a schedule of questions was prepared to standardise the conversations. Slightly different schedules had to be used, depending on the degree of previous contact between the student and interviewer. A slightly different schedule again was needed later, both for re-interviews of science students, and for interviews of humanities and modular students, as I did not have the same background information about these students. Appendix 1 gives more detail of the questionnaires. All the interviews were intended to be recorded on audiotapes to provide accurate

and detailed records, and in writing as back up. The tapes from interviews were selectively transcribed and field notes written up. Although selective transcription took less time than full transcription, obviously detail was not available in a written form, but was still available if necessary to check nuances or understanding. Some interviews were fully transcribed at a later stage. Some of the re-interviews were conducted by telephone which made recording more difficult. The very poor quality I was able to achieve of the recordings of telephone interviews led me to use written notes for these and subsequent telephone interviews. Telephone interviews do not allow visual clues to be followed up but some interviewees, given a choice, preferred follow up interviews to be conducted by telephone. The qualitative approach had the advantage of allowing unexpected issues raised by interviewees to be pursued and giving a more holistic perspective to the proposed project.

A major problem with this, as in any research, is in ensuring both validity and reliability of the evidence and its interpretation. In order for others to assess validity, the evidence provided must be plausible and credible. Partially structuring the interviews was used to increase reliability. Using internal checks also increased reliability: for example, colleagues and course records were consulted to validate data from interviews. Structuring also ensured that questions were asked in sequence, prevented altering of factual questions, and helped to avoid biased recording. Only one interviewer was used so standardisation of a team was not necessary. By employing a variety of methods it is hoped that cross-validity will have been achieved. Reactivity was also considered. Using a member of staff to conduct interviews can obviously affect the results, but an insider has insights and access. An insider is also subject to institutional politics and must be aware of personal bias. Attempts were made to reduce this by continuing discussion with colleagues and professional advisers; in particular, a sociologist who has been involved with the humanities course from the beginning and the lecturer who devised the original science course.

Numerical data from records were to be analysed, according to the level of information available. At the very least, number per year and gender

breakdown could be presented and examined for trends and patterns. While inspection of raw data might reveal differences and trends, a more rigorous testing would enable the statistical significance of any differences or trends to be determined. However, it must be noted that until the data were examined in detail, it was not clear whether there were large enough numbers to apply statistical tests. It was hoped that analysis such as Mann-Whitney U test or χ^2 , suitable for non-parametric data with relatively small numbers, could be used to check the significance of any perceived differences between cohorts and any perceived gender differences. This would provide some means of triangulation with the findings from qualitative data.

All the data collection methods had problems. Until time was spent on them it was not known what information was available in college records. This meant that it was difficult to specify initially how many students and which cohorts would be targeted in the postal survey. Using a postal survey, even with reply paid envelopes, meant that respondents would be self-selected and response rates to surveys are generally low.

Science students from a previous study were to be interviewed to examine their progress since leaving college, and to determine any changes in their views. This sample was opportunistic and pragmatic: I had acted as tutor to this 1996-7 cohort and already had some background material. Although a complete cohort of science students had initially been interviewed in the previous research, the sample was small and hence any analysis would have to take this into account. Tracing all the members of the 1996-7 science group turned out not to be possible. One at least had moved to a different region, others had moved house and changed telephone numbers, and the increasing use of mobile phones made tracking new ones impossible. Other science students were interviewed later as well as some humanities and modular access students in order to look for both similarities and differences between the courses. After a low response rate was encountered when trying to contact the science students by post and other means, it was decided that a large postal survey would not be feasible; the assumption

being that similar difficulties would be encountered with students from other courses and cohorts.

In retrospect, a written questionnaire to each cohort of students at the beginning and end of their course would have yielded more comprehensive data, and made sampling less opportunistic. This approach would have also yielded data from those who left before the end of the course. However, in order to follow students longitudinally questionnaires could not have been anonymous, and there could have been issues with permissions.

All participants in interviews had to be volunteers. As 'the basic ethical principle governing data collection is that no harm should come to the respondents as a result of their participation in the research' (Oppenheim, 1992, p.83), it was important that as far as is possible anonymity as well as confidentiality was preserved. The focus of the project was explained in outline to participants to ensure informed consent. There were further ethical concerns regarding my status as a member of staff. Would students think that they must respond affirmatively to any requests for interviews? To minimise this I tried to ensure that, wherever possible, I waited until results had been published and I was no longer involved with the students as a teacher before interviewing them. However, it was impossible to get round the fact that they still knew me as a teacher, and that their responses would be conditioned by this.

It was advisable for personal safety to carry out interviews in college during college hours. A comfortable room in college had advantages of quietness and security not necessarily found in parts of the town. The high rate of car crime in the town makes car parking difficult in the evening, and the culture of the town does not lend itself to quiet interviews in public places. While these safety concerns may be unfounded they are widely held and the college provided an acceptable venue. A disadvantage of this venue was the possibility that being in college might restrict the comments ex-students felt they could make. Some asked for some comments to be off-the-record or unrecorded, but generally they appeared not to find the venue restrictive. This may in part be due to the open-access nature of the college, which

provides a variety of services to the general public: meeting place, hairdressing and beauty salons, as well as a bistro and business development centre.

It became evident towards the end of the first stage and from feedback, that interviews with staff was an area that ought to be addressed formally, to discuss whether they confirmed or challenged student views, and to see if they had additional perspectives. I also included external examiners because they bring in a validating agency perspective, although they are not the same from year to year, and during the research the local Authorised Validating Agency for Access changed its working procedures. The title of the person from the Agency 'inspecting' Access courses changed from 'External Examiner' to 'External Moderator'. Although there appears to be little difference, apart from a title change, in practice there was a shift from external examination of academic standards to an external review of procedures, and a seemingly inevitable move towards self-duplicating forms and boxes to tick.

I included university staff, particularly as at least one local person has had a long term brief for Access students in her university. It was not clear however whether statistics were kept for the progress of Access students within the university system. These interviews were to be spread out over the year 2000-2001. I aimed for six course team members, including the IT course leader, and two university staff, (one from each of the two universities to which many of our students go).

In the second stage the following was planned: further interviews with 9 science students from the three cohorts in 1994-7, interviews with humanities students, formal interviews with course team members, managers, external examiners and university staff, early interviews with 'new' modular students in autumn 2000, followed by interviews with the same students at the end of the course in July 2001, continuing data collection on courses and students until September 2001, and investigation of the degree or course results of Access students at local universities and colleges.

I will now look in more detail at what was actually carried out. As stated above, all 9 science students from stage one indicated their willingness to be interviewed again. One was doing another course at the college and another had a son who was, so contact with these two was not a problem. To leave sufficient time between interviews, but yet complete the research in the given time scale, I intended to interview the students in January 2001 and then again in January 2002. The earlier stage had provided experience of interviewing, a data collection method which I do not find easy, and valuable lessons of a practical nature were learnt, such as the need for good indexing methods and speedy writing up of notes. Recording techniques were refined and more probing questions were used in subsequent interviews when students introduced unanticipated responses. Again subsequent tracing of students was difficult and only five were followed to the end of the research.

It was originally intended to interview a set of humanities students who matched the science students as closely as possible (age, gender, educational background, time elapsed since course completed). Problems of sample selection arose. Some Access students were now back in college, either as staff or students on another course. Given the time-scale, these students were obvious targets for an opportunistic approach. Cohen and Manion (1994) point to opportunistic sampling as a frequent method in case studies with issues of researcher bias and generalisability: consequently the bias in the sample had to be explored carefully. Further opportunistic sampling of humanities students was possible with the co-operation of one of the course leaders who, as a resident in the town, was in touch with many students. Again, the sample bias had to be addressed by careful framing of the conclusions. A target of 24 students spread over a year was proposed. As stated earlier, I intended to use a similar questionnaire for these students as in the first stage. Inevitably, and as predicted by my supervisor, this was too ambitious a target and the numbers were reduced. Eight interviews were carried out plus one with a modular student taking the humanities course.

A small number of students began to follow biology modules within the modular framework. I intended to include them in a continuing survey of ‘science’ students, and to look at changes in their views over the year, so I interviewed 5 of them in the autumn of 2000 and as many as possible in July 2001, when their course had finished. As well as the usual ethical issues, I had other concerns with these students. To what extent would these students feel that their co-operation or non-co-operation would affect their course results? Because I had some misgivings about how they would view this, particularly towards the end of the course, I delayed the final interviews until after results were published. I should have foreseen that this would make contact extremely difficult, which of course it did. So in the end only two students were interviewed again. Table 3.2 shows details of the interviews. As well as interviews, discussions of varying lengths took place with a number of people, as part of my participant observation within the college.

Table 3.2 Interview details

Categories	Number of interviews
Science students	9
Humanities students	8
Modular access students	6
External examiners/moderators	2
University lecturers	2
Course leaders	4

The Kennedy report into widening participation in further education (Kennedy, 1997) and responses to it were of particular relevance to the work described. These and other relevant materials such as the work of West (1995) and Hodgkinson and Sparkes (1997) were used to form a framework on which to base questions and to analyse the information obtained from the project, looking for insights, pointers, issues and ideas for discussion and further development, coding and categories. West (1995) suggests that students following Access courses often use education as a means to

reconstruct lives which for some reason had fallen apart. Education is seen, he says, as 'a lifeline during change and uncertainty' (p.133). Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) suggest that turning points such as those forced by redundancy are important, as are routines which may be evolving as people change. Kennedy (1997) explored the nature of work in FE and suggests some characteristics of good practice in widening participation, which is one of the stated aims of the courses.

All material was collated and coded using ideas of thematic analysis adapted from Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Miles and Huberman (1994) and an attempt made to apply theoretical ideas to the material collected. Some of the codes used were: retention, confidence, progression, widening participation, friendship, schooling, turning points. The codes initially used were generated from the literature review and preliminary work from when the research began. An example of coded material is given in Appendix 2 using extracts from an interview with a student which include the exploration of issues raised by the student earlier in the interview: The codes were put into themes such as personal development and widening participation. As the research continued other themes were identified, such as the quality of support given by course staff. The re-iterative process of the research meant that it was sometimes difficult to identify in retrospect when and from where particular themes first emerged. The themes which were pursued in depth were ones which came from both students and literature and from discussion with colleagues. Nevertheless my own interests have undoubtedly influenced the selection of themes.

The material from different sources was then compared and relationships noted and explored further. The context of the material was explored and connections made.

The collection of quantitative course data was an on-going process. I continued until September 2001, when information on progression for the 2000/1 cohort should have been available, and the latest batch of university results known. This process and the interviews with staff aided triangulation. Only partial information is available on degree results from

students, so I intended to investigate local university libraries for published results. This turned out to be far more difficult than I anticipated. This is in part because the particular details of degree courses the students took were not always known, and some students changed course. Eventually I decided that the LBOCN research in this area, with its negotiated access to university records would be a better alternative source of these data.

Negotiation and discussion with college management took place for me to carry out the proposed research. The vice-principal said that he could see no major problems and offered some limited secretarial support and help with postage. What was not forthcoming was any time in which to carry out the research. This, as the research progressed, became a problem, leading in part to a break in the period over which the research was carried out.

Despite the problems of data collection, sufficient quantitative and qualitative data were collected to allow analysis. Within the limits of the research and the methodology discussed above, the data was examined in the light of the two perspectives outlined earlier to explore the discourses of 'success' used in relation to these particular Access courses. An understanding of these discourses will inform debate about Access courses, and offer insight into possible changes in policy and practice to enhance Access.

Introduction

In order to answer the main research question, ‘In what ways are Access course ‘successful?’, data were collected, both contemporary and from archive sources. The data collected falls into two main parts: the documentary evidence which is both qualitative and quantitative, and the qualitative data from interviews and other encounters as explained earlier. The documentary evidence was collected from a variety of sources: national and local government statistics, QCA, FEFC, LSC and other bodies, the local Open College Network, and course and college records. Many of the latter are in the public domain as they are reported to funding or validating bodies, but are ones where access is simpler if you know of their existence. For this material being an insider was a resource rather than a source of bias. Some of the material, such as unsolicited letters from past students, was included in course documentation as part of an inspection process.

Documentary quantitative data

Both the managerialist and the allied funding discourse consider that retention of students, the numbers awarded certification and the subsequent progression of students are important indicators of successful courses. Using these criteria the data were analysed as explained in the previous chapter to see if the courses under review could be considered successful.

The summary statistics for the science, humanities and modular students are shown in Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 below. The enrolment data in each table was drawn from course reports, lists of enrolled students and FEFC statistics, which do not always tally. McGivney (1996) has pointed out that this is a major problem with statistics of this kind. Attempts were made to reconcile these figures; a frustrating experience which mirrors the frustrating and time-consuming ISR checks explained in an earlier chapter. The column labelled ‘enrolling’ shows the number of students first reported

to FEFC/LSC on November 1st, as required. However as the course begins in September, some students who started the course had already dropped out, in addition some students who enrolled in August never actually appeared in September.

Table 4.1 Access to HE. (Science) 1994-7

Number of students						
Year	enrolling	completing	passing	going to HE	graduating ¹	in work ¹
	m/f	m/f	m/f	m/f	m/f	m + f
1994-5	6/1	4/0	3/0	3/0	1/0	1
1995-6	8/8	5/6	4/4	1/5 ²	1/3	3
1996-7	5/5	3/2	2/2	2/2 ²	0/1	2
total	19/14	12/8	9/6	6/7	2/4	6

m = male, f = female

¹ number known to date

² one failed student accepted by university

An obvious anomaly arising from this table is that progression rates are normally expressed as a percentage of those gaining certification. However a local university offered places to two students who had not gained the Access certification. This explains how only four females passed in 1995-6 but five progressed to university. This shows clearly that the relationship between ‘success’ and progression is complex and non-linear. For comparison with benchmark data these two students have not been counted in subsequent analysis.

I had very detailed records for this course as part of the work I did for a preliminary course taken as part of the Ed. D. So for this course I was able to give separate records for males and females. There was insufficient surviving data for the other two courses. There were several causes for this. There had been changes over the years in the personnel leading the courses and records were lost in transfer. The staff concerned moved offices three times during the period concerned and detailed material had not been

Table 4.2 **Access to HE (Humanities) 1994-8**

		Number of students					
Year		enrolling	completing	passing	going to HE ¹	graduating ²	in work ²
1994-5	day	44	24	24	20	14	
	evening	at least 6	6	6	3	1	
1995-6	day	47	22	21	at least 6	6	1
	evening	28	14	12	4	1	
1996-7	day	38	29	25	14	6	2
	evening	14	6	6	4	2	1
1997-8	day	30	18	17	5	5	1
	evening	21	14	14	11	1	

¹ numbers from 1994 – 1998 do not include those going into nurse or social work training
² number known to date

Table 4.3 **Access to HE (Modular) 1998-2001**

		Number of students					
Year		enrolling	completing	passing	going to HE	graduating ¹	in work ¹
1998-9	day	36	15	14	10	3	3
	evening	21	10	7	3		
1999-2000	day	26	20	18	8	1	3
	evening	33	21	18	8		4
2000-1	day	20	15	12	10		1
	evening	30	9	9	6		

¹ number known to date

retained. In addition the management recording system had undergone several changes and again information was lost or not recorded. Changes in data protection legislation have also affected the college's policy on the storage of data and access to it. These problems demonstrate the difficulties of tracking information in the long term.

For all three courses the numbers graduating and in work are a minimum number. The information was gathered from students themselves, from students' knowledge of others, and from the course leader who lived in the town. These data are therefore not reliable.

Other difficulties are illustrated by analysis of numbers in Figure 4.1, which is taken from the course review in summer 2001. For the day time course (Fig 4.1a) the number of students enrolled on November 1st 2000 was 20, but the course report says that 23 students were present in September. This higher figure allowed two day time groups to be run initially, but with only 20 students remaining on November 1st it would have been possible to combine groups. However, by that time students had formed group identities which would have been damaged by the move (Day-time course leader, private conversation), students with younger children had care arrangements which would have been difficult to alter and some students had working patterns fitted around the course hours. So the two groups continued separately, although, from the perspective of managerialist discourse there was an 'unnecessary' expenditure. By May 1st, 15 students were enrolled (the third date on which figures were reported to FEFC) and 12 achieved the qualification. The achievement rate can therefore be legitimately reported as 12/23 (52%), 12/20 (60%) or 12/15 (80%) depending on context. For publicity purposes 80% would be reported, for FEFC 60% but the course evaluation discusses 52%: all are correct within their own particular context, but give different messages of success.

Figure 4.1 also illustrates some of the characteristics of the managerialist regime under which FE colleges operate (Aspinall in Bennett, *et al* 1994; Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 1999). Columns 11 and 13 were completed in November 2000 as targets which the course team were setting themselves.

Figure 4.1 Example of course review and evaluation report statistics

Course review and evaluation report

September 2000 – August 2001

Academic programme statistics

Access to humanities

Access certificate in humanities (day and evening)

1a	Award year 0001					One year or less					
		7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
		No enrolled November 1	No of transfers after November 1 (+in/-out)	No enrolled February 1	No enrolled May 1	Target retention May 1	No achieving full primary learning goal	Target acheivement	No of referrals/Part completions	No of Non-Completions	Non-acheivers
Year	Age										
Year 1 (0001)	19+	20	0/0	18	15	13	12	12	1	2	0

1b	Award year 0001					2 year course					
		7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
		No enrolled November 1	No of transfers after November 1 (+in/-out)	No enrolled February 1	No enrolled May 1	Target retention May 1	No achieving full primary learning goal	Target acheivement	No of referrals/Part completions	No of Non-Completions	Non-acheivers
Year	Age										
Year 1 (9900)	19+	30	0/1	27	26						
Year 2 (0001)	19+	11	0/0	9	9	10	9	8	0	0	0

As part of the review system in the following summer, these targets had to be commented on and incorporated in a self-assessment report for the funding council. The targets set for the following year are supposed to show a year on year improvement but do not take into account the differences in the student intake from year to year nor the fact that, for the full time group, they have only been in college for two months and are still developing skills. From Figure 4.1 it can also be seen that the retention and achievement figures for the evening group are lower than for the day group.

The reasons for this are, as always in the case of students who do not complete, very difficult to determine. The two-year span of the course and the two evenings per week attendance are contributory factors. During the two years, illness, pregnancy and change of personal circumstances are not unusual. In addition, Reay *et al* (2002) identified financial and marital reasons as reasons for the non-completion of the students they followed. While all these reasons also apply to the day-time students, the longer time-span of the evening course allows more time for these factors to occur. As, generally, evening students are also working, direct financial hardship is not so often a problem as change of domestic circumstances, work place or patterns of work.

Work also affects daytime students who, although theoretically full-time, often work to support themselves. In 2000-1, seven of the male students were 'working shifts at pubs, call centres' (Course report, 2001). One of the women in that year left because of the failure of her complex child-care arrangements and another because she became engaged. A third who dropped out after breaking her arm, rejoined and completed the course the following year; details of interviews with her are given later. Her reappearance is an example of the complex stories which lie behind the bare statistics.

Initial inspection of the raw data for science students summarised in Table 4.1, suggested that older students and men were more likely to complete the course. Subsequent statistical analysis (Mann-Whitney *U* test) showed that, whilst there was a higher mean age for those completing the science

courses, the difference was not statistically significant. The apparent difference in the number of men and women completing was also shown not to be significant (χ^2). (Appendix 3 gives an example of statistical analysis.)

As can be seen in Tables 4.2 and 4.3 which summarise numbers of students on the Humanities and from 1998-9 the subsequent Modular course, there is a variation in the initial numbers from year to year. This is not easy to explain, as over the years similar marketing methods have been used. The Access course leaders are more confident about explaining the retention and achievement rates. The evening Access course leader considers that a critical factor is the early formation within the group of a nucleus of students with a good working ethos. She considers that, over the years, the composition of the daytime Access groups (in which she is also involved) has changed, partly as a result of the inclusion of students on New Deal courses. As an example, she cites decreasing interest in the groups for visiting the Riverside University library at which they have membership rights: where in earlier years she filled two coaches, in 2001-2 she has only been able to fill a mini-bus. The course report for 2001 claims that the difference in retention rates for males and females for the daytime course for that year (45.4% as opposed to 58.3%) may be because the 'male group of students are not serious about completing a programme and are enrolling to show benefit agencies that they are looking for education in order to enhance their employment prospects' (Course report, 2001, p.2). This brings into question their commitment to the course and echoes Tight's (1998) criticism of some lifelong learning initiatives that 'the threat of economic and social exclusion hangs over those who do not take on this responsibility' (p.256). Evidence to support the claim in the course report is anecdotal, and the claim cannot be tested retrospectively; but it is supported by the low number of such students who complete. Other College courses that include New Deal students have reported similar problems. Inman (1999), in her study of the students on Access courses run at Russell University's local campus, also suggests that there is a shift in client group, which she considers is worth investigating. Unfortunately following her move to another post outside the region, this appears not to have been published.

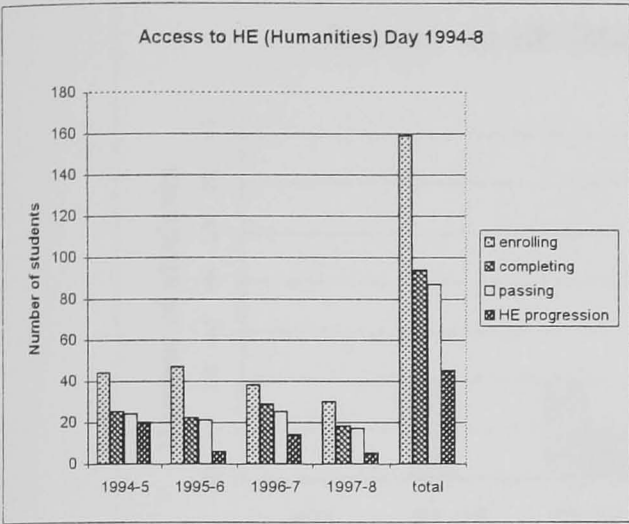
Figure 4.2 shows the statistics from Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 in graphical form, separated into day and evening where relevant, for the three different courses run in the department from 1993-2001. The charts display the variation in the evening group intake and the low retention for those cohorts compared to the day groups. There is also an obvious downward trend in the number of students on the day course. The course team thought that this was caused by the introduction of an Access to Health course in another department in 1997-8.

The charts also show the low retention in the evening groups compared to the day groups in the period 1998-2001. Using the total figures for passing and going to HE for the day and evening and science groups, it was found that there was no significant difference between the groups. However these figures are flawed in a number of ways, the major flaw being that the course reports give the number intending to go to HE but not the number who actually went. Unfortunately there is insufficient data to carry out any comparison of progression rates by gender or age, and also any such analysis would be based on this flawed data .

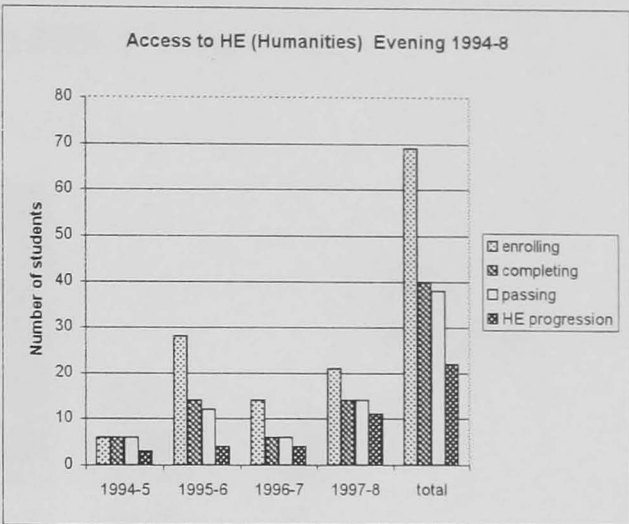
The academic year 2000 to 2001 is the one for which there are most complete internal records (see Figure 4.1) and the last year considered. Therefore this cohort of students' has been examined in more detail. Figure 4.3 displays the completion and retention by age, and Table 4.4 shows their destinations as recorded by the college.

Figure 4.2 Departmental Access to HE courses 1994-2001

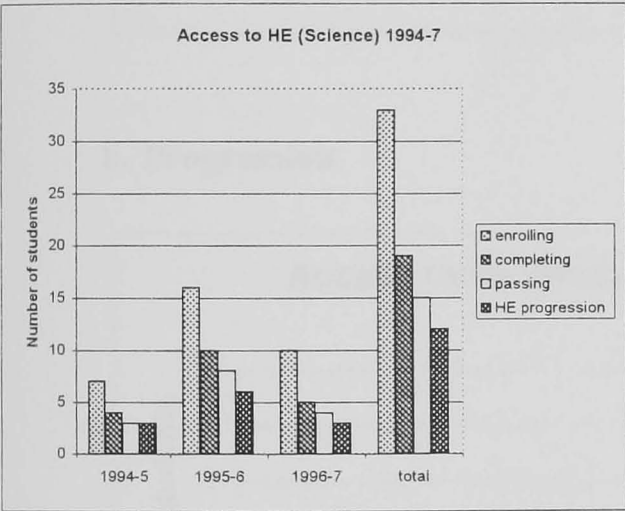
a. Humanities - Day



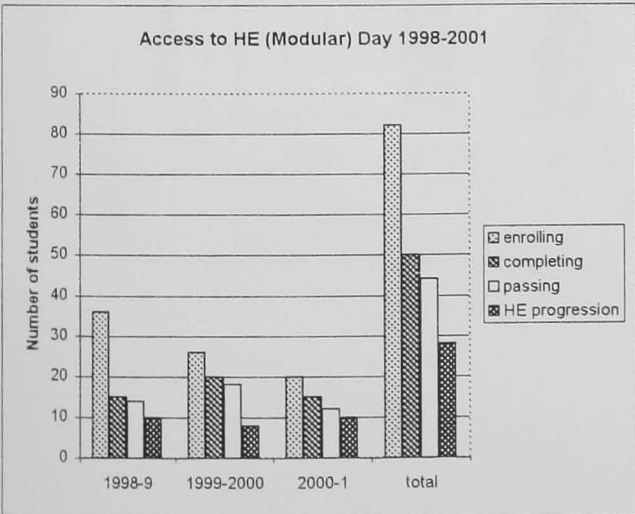
b. Humanities - Evening



c. Science



d. Modular - Day



e. Modular - Evening

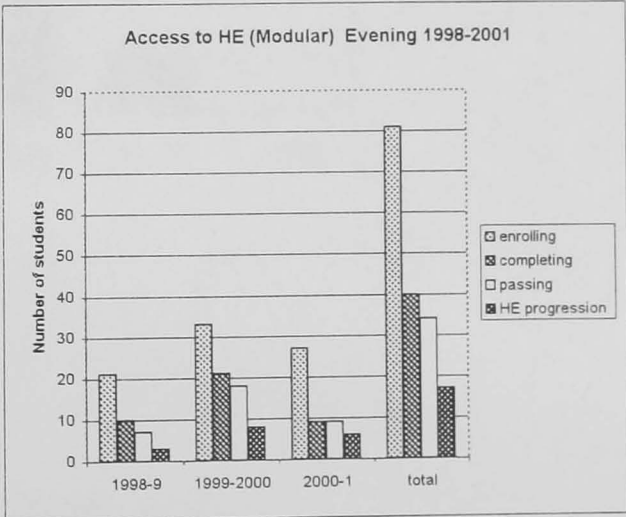
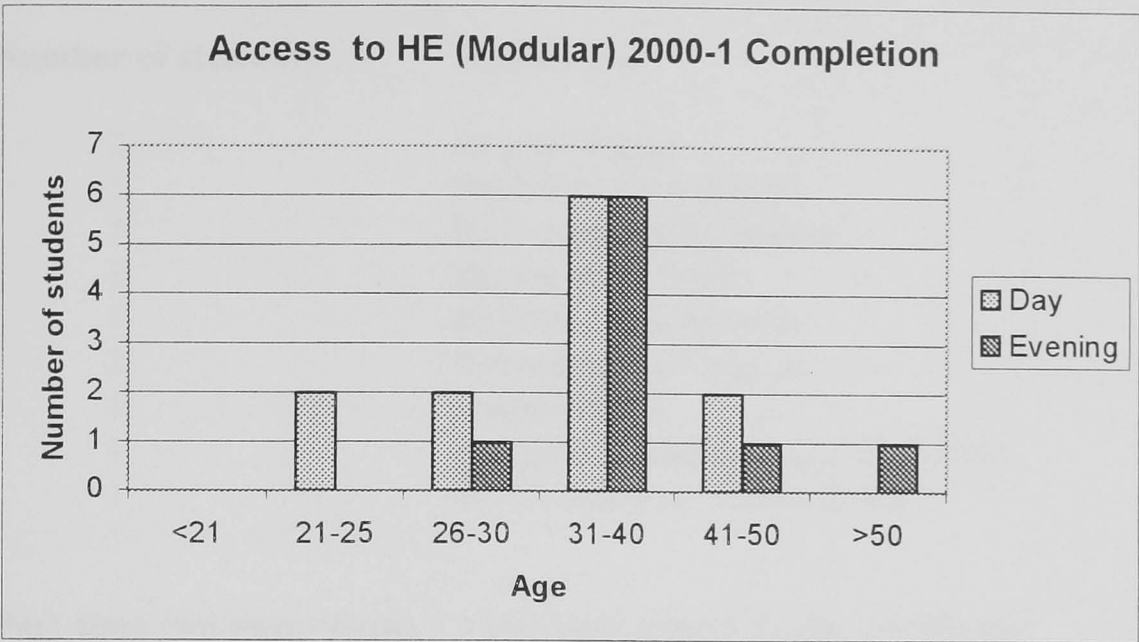


Figure 4.3 Access to HE (Modular) 2000-1 Age profile

a. Completion



b. Progression

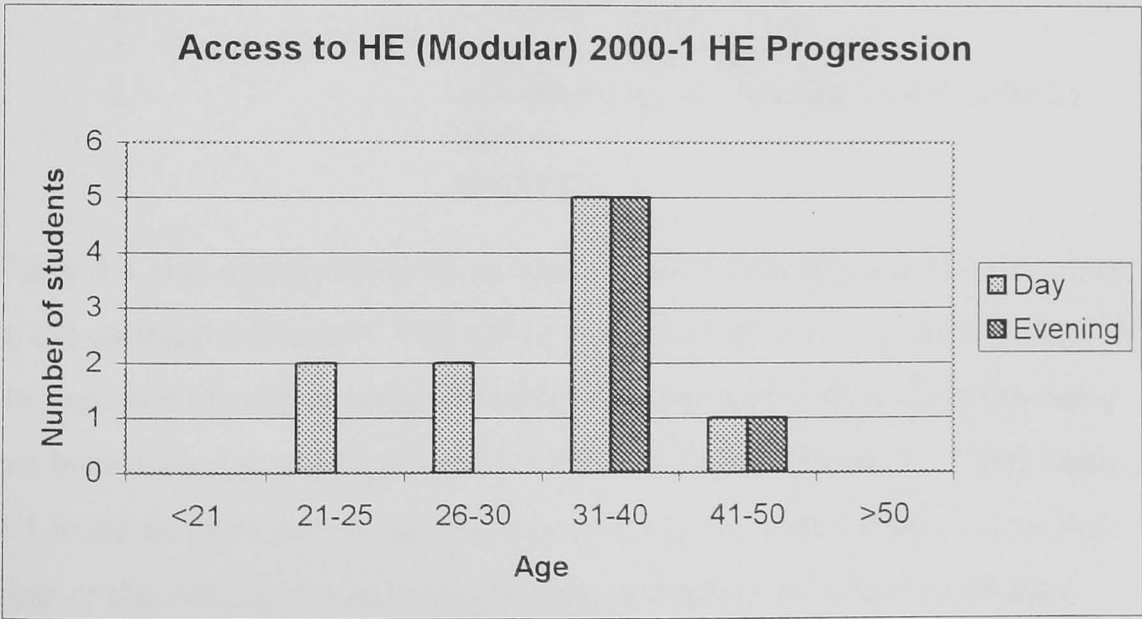


Table 4.4 Access students’ destinations summer 2001

Full-time one-year course – 12 students gained Access certificates

Number of students	Destination
2	English degree
1	teacher training degree
2	biological science degree
1	employment (Neil)
1	diploma in social work
2	forensic science degree
1	history degree
1	emigrated – deferred university entry
1	GCSE maths in college (Lena)

Part-time two year course – 9 students gained Access certificates

Number of students	Destination
3	nursing
2	diploma in social work
1	occupational therapy degree
2	deferred entry to franchised joint honours degree
1	unknown

Table 4.4 also displays a trend in the evening Access groups towards entry to the caring professions. For earlier years in Table 4.2 it is thought that in the reported figures progression to nursing and social work diplomas have not been included as progression to HE: yet another anomaly. From Figure 4.1 it can be seen that, using the November 1 numbers for the first or only year of the course, the progression rates to HE are 45% for the daytime course and 27% for the evening course for 2001.

After the completion of awards in summer 2001, the local Open College Network commissioned research into the progression to local Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of those students who had gained full Access awards. After completion of the research, in 2002, a copy of the report was sent to each constituent college. In Westland College, the report was not communicated to the course team, and I only heard of its existence towards the end of this research. It is difficult to know whether the lack of

communication is because the material was not considered to be of interest to the team or whether in the complexities and pressure of FE life it was simply overlooked. I was given permission to use the report's findings by the Network director: to maintain anonymity the report is referenced as (LBOCN, 2002). The specific aim of the LBOCN research was to gather reliable statistics on those students gaining awards in 2001 who progressed to local HEIs that autumn, in order to provide information for QAA, benchmark figures for LBOCN, course providers and HEIs and to get the possibility of identifying good practice. The report was published in time for the QAA revalidation visit in 2003.

The LBOCN numbers quoted are acknowledged to be an underestimate of the total number who progress to HE, as some students go to HEIs outside the area and others defer their entry until the following year. This is particularly true of those going to nursing courses which have more than one intake a year. However, it was hoped that by matching the names of those who gained awards with those on the HEIs' databases a more accurate picture could be gained than from the figures provided by colleges which are of those holding offers who intend to progress. Unfortunately for my purpose the LBOCN figures aggregated the figures from the three Access courses run within Westland College and to date it has not been possible to subtract the numbers for the Health and Computing Access courses offered in other departments. As in the research described here it was not possible to carry out a detailed socio-economic analysis. Table 4.5 gives details of the LBOCN comparison of LBOCN and college data.

Table 4.5 Comparison of LBOCN and Westland College data for 2000-1

	Number of successful completions	Progression to northeast HEIs	% Progression	Not progressing to NE HEIs	% Not progressing
LBOCN total ¹	574	259	45 %	315	55 %
Westland total ¹	42	20	48. %	22	52 %
Modular day ²	12	10	83 %	2	17 %
Modular evening ²	9	6	67 %	3	33 %
Modular total ²	21	16	76 %	5	24 %

¹ LBOCN figures ² Westland College figures

The first discrepancy is in the ‘successful completions’ column. There is no doubt that 21 students were awarded Access certificates on the Modular course: this means that 21 must have been awarded in other departments. Westland College’s database gives the college total for completions from other departments as 35. It is possible that only 21 out of 35 gained certificates but, if so, this is a very low achievement rate. There is another obvious discrepancy between the number recorded by LBOCN as progressing overall for Westland and the Modular figures contributing to them, as 6 of the 20 were recorded by LBOCN as progressing to HE computing courses. As none of the modular students intended to do computing, and it is unlikely that Health students would, this leaves 14 students as the total progressing for Health and Modular courses, but the Modular course claims 16. It has not been possible to unravel the discrepancy but while it is possible that students deferring entry or leaving the area might explain the discrepancy, a more likely explanation is that the college data quoted by LBOCN is flawed, making any analysis based on these data of dubious validity. Nevertheless these statistics are being used by LBOCN in analysing the success of its validated courses.

As a college, the progression rate quoted by LBOCN is slightly higher than the norm for LBOCN, the age group distribution of the completers is similar to the norm but there is a higher progression rate in the 31-50 age range. It

was found on close examination that the LBOCN commentary was not consistent with the statistics it quoted for the college, so numbers rather than commentary have been used. The college's overall numbers make it one of the mid-range course providers in the region, but the small numbers it generates per year mean that any statistics will be changed dramatically by small variation in numbers.

The above work showing the problems and difficulties associated with the collection and analysis of the statistics leads to the conclusion that success criteria based on completion, achievement and progression statistics are flawed and must be treated with care. The small numbers involved, the ambiguities in the data and the problems with the collection of progression data make conclusions dubious. So managerial and governmental measurements of efficiency are fundamentally flawed if they are based on similarly flawed data. Measured against the local benchmark of LBOCN data for 2001, which is underpinned by the QAA's view of success, and taking total statistics over all available years for the Humanities, Modular and Science courses, they do seem to fulfil the primary aim of providing progression to HE, and at a higher rate than the local norm. So at both a local and an institutional level the college Access courses seem to have allowed some students to undertake further 'successful' study as intended.

However, judged against the QAA primary criteria for Access courses the student (Neil) who went into work and the student (Lena) who went on to do a GCSE maths course (Table 4.4) do not appear successful. Neil had started college courses several times since leaving the armed services, none of which he had completed. Neither had he obtained a job using his outdoor activity qualifications, which was what he wanted. To complete the course and obtain a local post doing exactly what he wanted was for him, a considerable success. Inman (1999) and the evening Access course leader both consider that it can take several years to obtain local employment of a suitable nature, so this is an even more successful outcome than the bare statistics reveal. Lena, who came back to do GCSE maths, also considered that the course had been successful for her, in boosting her self-confidence and proving to her daughter that she could work at this level. It had also

given her enough confidence to tackle a course which she had previously perceived as hard. She was the oldest of that year's group and not financially in need of employment.

From the managerialist discourse used to measure the success of these courses these individuals are not counted as successful as they did not progress to HE, however from a personal perspective they are. So there are other criteria for success than managerialist ones. This raises a further question to be considered in any conclusions about the success of Access courses: 'If a combination of criteria is to be used, which criteria are dominant and why?' There appear to be tensions between criteria for the success of courses and criteria for the success of individuals. In the ordinary course of my work during the period of this research, managers claimed in meetings to take into account the interests of learners, but since learners' interests may not coincide with those of the organisation further tensions are created. Bearing this in mind it is appropriate therefore to move on to looking at qualitative data from a variety of sources.

Qualitative data

Some of the earliest qualitative data came from unpublished research done earlier as part of other Open University courses required as part of the Ed. D. This was reanalysed as part of this research. Following this review and the literature review the qualitative data was analysed using themes which had emerged. Other material was gathered from new interviews as described earlier. Another source of qualitative material were more casual conversations, which I was part of or became aware of as I worked in the open plan staffroom in which I am based: a result of being a participant observer. Wherever possible I asked the people making the comments if they would write them down (or allow me to do so) so that I could use them in this research. Sometimes this was not possible or convenient, as for example in the brief exchanges held in passing on stairs. There are obvious ethical issues about using this material: even with names changed an insider would be able to identify sources, for example. However, the staff involved were aware of the research I was doing and that I had managerial permission

for it. The staff often drew my attention to material they thought useful and introduced me to ex-students who might help. Other sources of brief exchanges were ex-students who called in to see members of staff to report on their progress or came to talk when I was sitting at a table in the town centre during the enrolment period at the beginning of the academic year. An example of this is when the partner of a man trying to enrol for an A level course began spontaneously to talk about the benefit she had received from the Access course she had followed. As in all these cases I asked permission to use the material provided. These opportunistic encounters were not tape-recorded, although notes were taken and permission for the use of the material sought. Table 4.6 gives the names and courses of the students. In order to aid the detailed analysis of the themes, brief histories of each student are given as an introduction.

Table 4.6 List of students interviewed

Name	Course	Year
Corin	Science	1994-5
Trevor		
Chris		
Beryl		1995-6
Carol		
Colin		
Eric		
Fiona		
Avril		1996-7
Bridget	Humanities day	1990-1
Jenny	day	1992-3
Siobhan	day	1995-6
Clara	day	1996-7
Lisa	evening	1995-7
Sandra	day	1996-7
Debra	day	1997-8
Marie	evening	1997-9
Katherine	Modular day/evening	1998-2000
Donna	day	2000-1
Thelma	day	
Katy	day	
Joan	day	
Lena	day	

Humanities students

All the 8 students interviewed were people who came back into college for some reason, 7 to take an adult teaching course as student teachers or on placement from Hammerton University. The sample is therefore biased and opportunistic. It is further biased in that all the students were female and all were eventually in employment in full-time posts, although two of these are linked to short-term funding. In that sense all the students have met course aims in obtaining better jobs than they had initially. This is the only section which includes some information directly from evening-course students.

The student from the earliest cohort was **Bridget** who followed the daytime humanities course from 1990-1. Following this she took a sociology degree: a complete change from her original intention of nursing. She is now employed as a lecturer in FE and came to my attention following an essay I marked as part of her work for her PGCE (FE). After the PGCE was finished she agreed to allow me to use extracts from this essay in this research. Although this may appear to be a conventional success story, Bridget had left school with no qualifications, partly because of family circumstances and partly because she had not enjoyed the kind of teaching she had encountered at school.

Jenny was a daytime student from 1992-3. She had qualifications which would have allowed her to go straight to university but after some time out of work to have children she did not have sufficient confidence to go straight to University. She worked part-time at the university during and after her degree in Health Studies at Russell university's local campus. Following the degree she came back to Westland for a teaching certificate and eventually gained a post at the local Sixth-form College in careers advice. She has recently completed a postgraduate diploma by distance learning in information, advice and guidance.

Siobhan was daytime Access (Humanities) student from 1995-6. She gave up her full-time post to take the Access course as a full-time student and subsequently did a degree in Youth and Community work at Russell

University. Since leaving school she had been involved in youth work, and still is as a detached youth worker, although her main job is with a young people's supported housing project in a nearby town.

Debra did a degree in English at Hammerton and says that without the Access course she would 'still be watching day-time television'. The course helped her determination and she paid credit to 'tutors who told me I was degree material'. After working with New Deal clients at another local FE college she has recently gained a permanent managerial post at the same college.

Clara did a degree in criminology at Haymarket following her fulltime Access Humanities course from 1996-7 and is now working with a family support organisation in Westland while doing a distance learning MA in play therapy. She also undertook a vocational teacher training course.

Sandra was also an Access student from 1996-7. She was the only student in this group who did not take a teaching qualification of some kind: she gained a Diploma in Social work. Throughout her time at College and her subsequent course she worked for the NHS and was promoted as a manager.

Lisa also gained her access certificate in 1997, but as an evening student she had begun in 1995. She completed an English degree with QTS and moved into teaching in an 11-18 school in a neighbouring authority, before moving to a school in the town and then in to supply work. She had worked in a school before she went to university and had thought carefully before making the move into teaching.

Marie had no formal qualifications when she enrolled on the evening course in 1997. She completed the certificate in 1999, and worked for a private provider of work-based learning. She has since completed a teaching certificate and recently gained a new post, doing similar work, in another local town.

Modular course

One student was interviewed from the 1998 daytime cohort; she completed her course as part of the evening group the following year. She returned to Westland college as part of her university course. Five full-time students on the daytime Modular course from 2000-1 were interviewed at the end of their first term. Although it was intended to interview them again at the end of the course it was only possible in the end to keep up with two of them (Lena and Joan). The student identified by the course leader as one of the highest performing female students in the cohort 'left the course under mysterious circumstances and we have failed to contact her' (Course leader). The others are assumed to have progressed to higher education according to their known intentions but this cannot be confirmed. All were taking science modules as part of their course.

Katherine started on the daytime Access Modular course in 1998. She had left school with two O levels, and had worked as a secretary for some years, before having children. She did not take all the required courses that year but completed the certificate in the evening the following year. She went to take an English degree with QTS at Hammerton but eventually decided that she didn't want to teach school age students, so she converted to an English degree and is now working in the south of the region in another FE college.

Lena was the eldest at 48 of the students interviewed from the 2000-1 cohort. After the Access course, she went on to take a GCSE maths course in which she narrowly missed a grade C. Two years after she began her Access course she enrolled on another course at level 3 in the national qualification framework, from which she subsequently withdrew. She is now working in a voluntary capacity for the Youth Justice Board and in a local school.

Donna was 36 when she started the course and she had decided that she wanted a degree by the age of 40 after visiting a friend with a daughter doing A levels. She had taken a City and Guilds hairdressing course when she was 21, and for a while had her own hairdressing salon. At the end of

the Access course she had a place at university to read biosciences but she emigrated to the USA.

Thelma was 31 when she began the course, taking a mixture of science and humanities modules. Since leaving school with O levels and CSEs she had taken a number of part-time courses including ones at BTEC level 3. She was a cross-country runner on the town team. She wanted to read Forensic Science at Riverside University, although course records show that she went to Riverside to take Biosciences.

Joan was 34 when she started the course. She had no educational qualifications as she 'was a little tearaway at school. I was a horrible child' and did not attend school at all in Year 11 following bullying. Her progress was not quite as smooth as this might seem, as this was her second year on the course. Her aim was to be a nurse. In fact she went to Riverside to read Forensic Science where she has completed her second year.

Katy was the student who disappeared. She was 29 and had two children and a partner with whom she lived. Like Thelma she was an accomplished sports person, playing basketball and qualifying as a coach. A course at her son's school got her back into education and she then followed this up with a pre-Access course at the College and a Summer School course run at Riverside University before coming on the Access course as recommended by the university. She had a City and Guilds qualification in leisure and recreation. Her aim was to go to Riverside University to take Sports Studies and then to become a teacher. She was offered an unconditional place at University because of her previous courses but it is unclear if she took it up.

Science Students

Nine students from the three Science cohorts who had either kept in contact or who responded to a postal request were interviewed as part of this research. Unlike the other interviews for other courses these included men: five out of the nine.

1994-5

Chris, who was 29 when he started the Access course, failed one module at the first attempt in 1995 but passed the module, and therefore gained the certificate in the following year. Since gaining the Access certificate he has enrolled on a number of college courses with a variety of outcomes. He passed a City and Guilds course for vocational teachers based on teaching fencing, but withdrew from a Cert. Ed. course that required more academic rigour. He has also enrolled on A level biology and English, GCSE English language and maths, with possible goals of a course for primary teaching or a Microsoft professional qualification: college records show that he did not complete these. It was not possible to trace him after 2000.

Corin was 32 when he joined the Access course in 1994. He already had an A level in biology and O levels that included maths and English language. He went to Hammerton University to take Environmental Biology in which he subsequently gained a 2:1 degree. He did not find any suitable work for 18 months but in 2002 had a short-time contract in the local brewery laboratory. I have been unable to contact him since then but anecdotal evidence suggests that he has had some further short-time contracts.

Trevor was 32 when he had a college course suggested to him by his community psychiatric nurse. He has six O levels, and had completed a bricklaying apprenticeship, although he had wanted to be a joiner. He completed and passed the course in 1995, and accepted a place on the B. Sc. in Environmental Management at the local campus of Russell University. He stayed for 8 days, before deciding, for a variety of reasons, that the course was not for him. He is currently working as a youth worker.

1995-6

Beryl had a mixture of O levels and CSEs. At 25 she was bored with her work and a casual conversation with a customer in the take-away shop in which she worked catapulted her on to the Access course. She thoroughly enjoyed the course and the subsequent university course in forensic

pathology at Riverside, from which she gained a 2:2 degree. Six months after graduating, she was still working in the take-away while applying for an average of two jobs a week. She had set herself a target of a year to obtain a local job, before she starts looking further afield. It was not possible to find whether she did.

Carol was a 39 year old housewife with young children. She had support from both her husband and his family. After gaining the Access certificate, she enrolled on the environmental degree programme at the nearby campus of Russell University: this fitted with family commitments. After gaining a 2:1 degree, she did a variety of courses and is now working as a specialist teaching assistant in a local 11-16 school.

Colin was a quantity surveyor and a qualified rugby union coach. Redundancy made him consider returning to education. He initially considered A levels, but the advice he received from the college encouraged him to enrol on the Access Science course in 1995, when he was 39. He chose to take modules in psychology, biology, sports science and sociology. Mathematics and IT are compulsory. After passing the Access course, he went to Russell to follow a new degree course called 'Sport in the Community'. He gained a 2:1 degree and is now running after-school sports clubs, taking a Ph.D. funded by Sports England and teaching part-time.

Eric had been a fire fighter until he had an accident. He had only Northern Counties (now NCFE) qualifications, having left school at 15 for a series of jobs. He came to college at the age of 41 with a fixed ambition to be a physiotherapist. He was warned that entry to physiotherapy courses is extremely difficult. Despite the difficulties mentioned, Eric passed the course, and enrolled on an A level part-time Biology course to increase his chances. He applied but did not gain entry to physiotherapy. Part of the reason for this was the age limit which one local university applies: this had not been mentioned in preliminary telephone calls from the college to the university. He did not complete the A level course. In 2000, he was looking after his family, using his Access course knowledge to help his 12 year old son with homework. It was not possible to contact him later.

Fiona was a 27 year old single woman without dependants, living in a town to the south of Westland. She had A levels in languages which she had taken 10 years earlier. She chose an Access course rather than part-time A levels because of its breadth and the short length of the course. Unlike most of the other students interviewed she had explored universities beyond the region. She decided to go to a University College about 60 miles away to do BA Maths degree with QTS (Qualified teacher status) in primary education. During the Access course and the degree she worked part-time. After gaining a 2:2 degree, she took a teaching post in Westland and is still there in a promoted post.

1996-7 students

As explained in Chapter three, only one of these students was interviewed as part of this research, although one said he would be. **Avril** was 38 when she started the course. She was working part-time in a local library. She thought that there were problems with her marriage, and had the long-term aim of taking a university course in another part of the country. After she enrolled on the course her marriage did indeed break down, she was left with debts and had to take on extra jobs in order to survive. She passed the Access course and then successfully completed an HND in computing at Westland College. She now works with a housing organisation in a nearby town, using her computing skills.

Themes

As explained earlier the interview material from students and others was examined using themes derived from coding: progression, preparation for HE, employment, wider perspectives, civic participation, confidence, on-course support and personal development. The themes are not equally weighted. For example progression, as a criterion which is present in all perspectives, is given more weight than civic participation which while considered important by practitioners (Preston and Hammond, 2003) is not mentioned directly by students and is a much more complex factor.

Similarly confidence is given more weighting than on-course support. Some documentary evidence also contributed to this analysis. Some of the evidence overlaps themes, for example evidence in the progression section is also relevant to confidence.

Academic progression

The stated aim of Access courses from the QAA, the managerialist discourse and course staff, is progression to higher education. For most students this means a first degree at a university, but for some their aim has been diplomas in social work or nursing. It was only from 1999 that the college data collection system counted these diplomas as progression to HE. While it is generally understood that progression will be to higher academic levels, for many people this is not the case: their involvement is more complex. McGivney (2002) suggests that this more 'zig-zag' progression is more characteristic of older rather than younger adults, and is particularly true of women in England.

Carol is an example of this. She had no particular degree in mind when she enrolled on the Science course in 1995. After gaining a 2:1 degree in Environmental Science, she trained for voluntary work in health promotion. In retrospect, she does not know whether she took the right degree, but thinks that it would have been difficult for any one to help her as she had little idea about what she wanted to do. After her voluntary work training, Carol came back to College to take an adult teaching certificate which she completed successfully. She did some part-time work in the College on a one-to-one basis supporting students doing GCSE maths. She realised that she liked working in this way and gained a permanent post at a local 11-16 school as a teaching assistant in the mathematics department. While she has had continued involvement in learning it has not been at increasing higher academic levels as she has moved from level 3 to level 4 and back to level 3.

In contrast Colin's career after the Access course has been more linear. He, like Carol, was one of the 1994/5 cohort of Science Access students. Colin is a married man with a family. After passing the Access course, he went to

Russell, travelling the 20 miles each way daily. Although he found it hard initially to balance family and travel, he found he could cope academically. He treated university as a 9-5 job, although he also coached the university rugby team. He gained a 2:1 degree and researched, with two other graduates, the possibility of setting up after school sports clubs. In 2003, Colin was lecturing part-time, and working as teaching assistant at Russell University while studying for a Ph. D. He was benefiting from funding from Sports England. He is now also running some after school sports clubs. While his post-Access learning career from 1995 has been at continually higher levels, he did already have a professional qualification before he enrolled on the Access course.

Fiona was a younger woman whose learning, like Colin's, followed a more linear path. She was bored with her job and decided to return to education and to make a complete change from languages. She was undecided initially about the degree she wanted to take and then about the level at which she wanted to teach. During the Access course and the degree she worked part-time. After gaining a 2:2 degree, she has taken up a teaching post in Westland. In 2003, she is still teaching at the same school, on a permanent contract, and has been given a promoted post.

Marie's completion of a teaching certificate at level four in the national qualifications framework is also a linear progression, but she too may now be moving down a level in order to widen her qualifications in basic skills teaching. Although she has progressed to HE as her Cert.Ed. was awarded by Hammerton University, Marie does not fit the pattern of progression to a degree.

Not all students achieve accreditation in further study, nor progression to HE. At the time Eric enrolled on the Access course he was living with his parents-in-law in very cramped surroundings because a dispute over compensation had left the family with financial problems. The compensation had still not been paid in February 2000. The cramped conditions in which he was living made studying difficult. After failing to gain entry to physiotherapy, he was using his Access course knowledge to

help his son with homework. He maintained that although he has not used his qualification, it increased his knowledge and gave him an interest in science.

For some students such as Lena the original aim was not progression but 'personal satisfaction'. Lena was first interviewed in 2000 at the beginning of her course, which was the new modular one including science modules. She had no monetary worries although she lived in one of the most deprived areas of the town in her own home. Since she left school at 16 without qualifications she had had a very varied career, including lollipop lady and supervisor at a local crisp factory. She 'had no great ambition' and was just taking the course for personal satisfaction, after the death of her mother and the point at which her children became self-sufficient. She entered the course after attending a pre-Access course. She said that she 'was learning about herself'. Her daughter, who is a head of mathematics in a secondary school, could not see why she wanted to take the course.

She says 'Well, you know, you're not looking for a career. Why do it? You've survived this long. Why? What do you want out of it?' I said 'It's for myself.'

Her husband, however, was supporting her.

Oh yea. He just wishes ... He's not bothered what I do as long as I'm happy I can do whatever. But you see I haven't got the responsibility like the years with children. I mean it does make a difference.

She had wondered if she was dyslexic but did not seem to be. She has now moved just south of the town to a better area. Two years after she began her Access course she enrolled on another course at level 3 in the national qualification framework. So Lena has moved from a level 3 course to a level 2 and back to a level 3 course. She is still maintaining her learning but not progressing to a higher academic level. Is this then a successful

outcome? She maintains it is, as completing the Access course proved 'I can do it'.

Although in the managerial discourse it is progression from the course which is considered, it is also important to review the starting points of the students. The QAA aims mention those with few or no prior qualifications.

Marie and Bridget had no prior qualifications, neither did Joan, who after being bullied never returned to school.

I basically I never went to school in me fifth year ... if my Mam – right – had been like I am with my kids I wouldn't be here now, I'd be somewhere else. I'd be in a decent sort of job – I mean I had the brains when I was a kid. I can't say I didn't because I sat in the classroom and it just like come – I mean I didn't have to revise or anything and I would get all good grades all the way through school, and then all of a sudden there was a couple of girls started to pick on me and I got really bullied, and it ended up I wouldn't go to school anymore. It was me own loss really...

So for Joan coming back to take an academic qualification was real progression, and being on the course was a success in itself. These students 'stories' are examples of a very complex picture and do not sit easily in any one theme. This complex picture points to a difficulty in using success criteria derived from these more qualitative considerations.

Eric did have school leaving qualifications but these were locally certificated and at a level lower than O level. Katherine who is younger had two GCSEs but not mathematics and English which were required for her initial aim of secondary school teaching. Alan in contrast did have mathematics and English and had completed an apprenticeship. For all these students in completing an Access course there was obvious academic

progression. Avril and Beryl had started A levels but not completed them, so for them too completion demonstrates progression.

For Jenny, Fiona, Corin and Carol, who already had A levels, there was no progression in level but the course provided an important step in returning to study and work. Jenny says she ‘was ill-equipped to go back to the work place’. For Fiona the course provided a change from languages to mathematics. Colin also used the course as a means of changing direction from surveying to sports studies: in his case the return was to a lower level of study.

So as McGivney (2002) suggests academic progression is much more complex than a simple linear route. Sargant (1996) maintains for a majority of people this will indeed be the case as they ‘interweave their learning with the rest of their lives’ (p. 198), for example going back to learn about basic gardening techniques in later years after achieving high academic qualifications. Thus as these complex learning histories illustrate, a simple criterion by which to categorise academic or even work-related (as opposed to leisure learning) progression and therefore judge ‘success’ would be very difficult to construct. Such a criterion would need to look at a complex number of variables over a complex time scale and the issue is addressed further in the next chapter.

Preparation for HE

Preparation for HE for Access students is not only about getting to HE but also about succeeding there. For those students who continue to HE it is important that the course they have taken supports their work at a higher level. From a managerial and QAA discourse this must also be true, although it is not explicit. From the course leader perspective, the daytime Access course leader confirms that one of the main purposes of the course is that:

Access courses are designed to enable adult learners to
improve their academic skills and increase their confidence

levels to allow them to undertake self-selected training and/or further education.

So does this happen in practice?

Colin is sure that the course was a good grounding for his degree in a variety of ways.

As a mature student out of education I needed a science base. On a professional level I'd accessed information but not on an academic level.... better prepared than A level students. IT was invaluable – high level of computer literacy was required on the university course.

For Avril it was the introduction to IT in the Access course which made her think that she could take an HND in the subject. It stood her in good stead alongside much younger people. Siobhan says that without the Access course she 'couldn't have coped'.

Bridget felt intimidated initially by her younger peers.

They were full of confidence and very vocal in tutorials from the start. It was not long, however, that I realised that my learning experience on the Access course had prepared me very much more appropriately than those who had arrived directly from A level courses. I had developed my analytical skills to a higher level than those from the normal route had. I had also developed the ability to criticise and empathise with peers in a more mature and utilitarian way.

She also found that the Access course had prepared her for independent reading and research. Jenny also cited gaining analytical skills as a benefit, and knowing how 'to research and use a library properly'.

One of the university lecturers interviewed said that as an admission tutor she preferred Access students as they had skills and determination which A level students lacked, (University Lecturer 1). A second who was the external examiner for the Science course as well as a lecturer in the same department as the woman above, said in his course report that ‘I was satisfied that the quality of the students’ work matched the requirements for entry into HE.’ Another university lecturer who is also a moderator for Access courses (but not at Westland) also concurred with this: ‘Access courses can be considered successful in that some students go on to higher education, and those who do so are usually well-prepared for at least first year study’ (Moderator 2).

Not all students progress as smoothly as the students quoted above did. Without the Access course, particularly the chemistry, Corin does not think he would have managed the university course he took.

cos if I hadn’t done ... Chemistry I’d have been finished, I wouldn’t have lasted. In fact I didn’t last because I failed it first time round and I went away very disappointed ‘cos I was two percent short and because – I did well in the course work but it was – what he said was ‘You did brilliantly in the course work’, he said ‘but you were just a couple of points short of being close enough to give you a pass’, so he said what I’d done I’d got all the wrong learning books, and I’d bought them all in the University, for three pound each or something, and I sat at home and worked through them, and did all the exams and all the tests.

The university had recommended that he take an Access course before going to university, and in addition to subject knowledge the course had given him study skills which he needed to sort out his chemistry. He says ‘The Access course itself give me what the University told me I would need as far as study skills were concerned’, although the science course hadn’t helped him with essay writing. Joan too had problems with chemistry and

mathematics; 'I had to do summer school to keep up with maths and chemistry as it was my weakest point' but she still thinks the Access course prepared her well. Although all students made comments about study skills, science students commented more about the content of the Access courses they had done than other students. This may be a reflection of a general difference between humanities and science subjects rather than the specific modules in the Access course.

One of the university lecturers also pointed out a potential weakness in Access courses which he had discovered as a moderator in other colleges.

In some cases too the course concentrates on the provision of subject knowledge and study skills, leaving students unprepared for some aspects of study in HE. Of particular concern in many cases is the high level of supportive flexibility over issues such as assessment deadlines, which seems to help the student but does little to prepare them for the more rigorous approach of HE institutions.

(Moderator 2)

So there are some weaknesses but these must be set against the overwhelmingly positive views expressed by the students interviewed. However, these were students who had progressed successfully and there was some anecdotal evidence that other students had not had such an easy time.

Employment

Although employment is not the primary aim of these courses from the QAA perspective, it is a major aim in the course submissions as shown in Chapter One. For many students, too, this is a major aim of enrolment on the course. So from a student perspective improved employment would appear to be a measure of 'success'. However, employment opportunities in the town are limited and often any job is welcome, as Beryl found. A job

which is related to qualifications is a bonus, although many of these are short-term supported by project funding.

Jenny's post at a local college is an example of this. Jenny also pointed out that as an 'older' person, for whom maternity leave had not been not an option, the Access course and subsequent degree, enabled her to re-establish herself in the job market after having children. In the time she had been out of full-time employment the workplace had become much more computerised and although she had considered herself computer literate the course and degree gave her the more up-to-date IT skills she lacked. Marie also thinks that the Access course has helped her, as she had 'nothing' before the course.

The mature students with families who enrol on the course usually do not want to move away from the town. The leader of the evening Access course thinks that it can take three or more years for ex-students who have graduated to gain employment which builds on their degrees. Corin, Avril, Colin, Fiona and Carol have all been successful in gaining degree-related employment in the locality. However Carol's post is one for which a degree is not a requirement and Colin's is not permanent. Neither was Corin's when I was last able to contact him.

Corin had had a variety of jobs, including working 'on the floor' of the local brewery. He had always wanted to take a degree, and when he resigned from a job in which he had been unhappy, he decided that he should try to fulfil this goal. Having decided that he had to stay in the area for domestic reasons, he enquired about degree courses at local universities and was advised by one to take a lower level course as a first stage to returning to study. On the way to college to inquire about suitable courses, he met someone who mentioned that she had done the Humanities Access course and that the college was just about to start a Science version. He found that the Access course would give him a broad range of subjects and decided to take it. During the course and during the first two years of his university course he worked as a taxi-driver. He had no major problems with the course, although he found chemistry and physics harder than environmental

science and biology. He knew which course he wanted to do at university and had decided that Hammerton University would suit him. Corin was accepted, but unfortunately the course he selected did not run. There were however other courses that were similar, and after a year on one of these he changed to Environmental Biology in which he subsequently gained a 2:1 degree. During the course his wife had another child. In his second year at university his wife was ill, and during the final year he had an illness which resulted in him taking his final exams in September rather than June. Corin was then unemployed for 18 months before obtaining a short-term contract to cover maternity leave in the laboratories of the brewery where he had previously worked and where he was known.

Avril has had more success than Corin in her search for employment, but she was prepared to travel to two of the next towns. She was working part-time in a local library, and continued to do so throughout the course. After she enrolled on the course her marriage broke down, she was left with debts and had to take on extra jobs in order to survive. She passed the Access course, and after discussion with student advisers and tutors, she decided to take an HND in computing at the college. One reason for this was that she valued the support she had gained from friends and her parents during her difficulties, and thought that she might need further support during an HE course. She was also able to continue her library work. During a re-organisation of the library service she gained a full-time post. She is the first member of her family to graduate, and came into college specifically to thank those who had helped her during the three years she had spent there. She had the option of going on to upgrade her HND into a degree, but decided against this, as it would mean travelling to the next town and becoming a full-time student. Avril realised that she preferred to guarantee her future independence by not giving up her job. After completing her HND Avril became unhappy with her work in the library and after a short time working in a call centre moved on to a job with a housing association exploiting the computer skills she had developed in her HND and helping people in the community. She has married again, and she and her husband are considering adoption, and while this can not be seen as a direct consequence of an Access course, she thinks it was a long term result of the

greater self-confidence she had achieved from the course. She maintains that she would not have got her present high-level job without her HND and wouldn't have done her HND without the Access course. She says that if she 'hadn't gone on the Access course, then the HND, I would be in a dead-end job or on the dole'. She demonstrates what Plewis and Preston (2001) categorise as long term benefits.

Siobhan also used a similar phrase saying 'it enabled me to move out of a dead-end job'. In contrast, Sandra managed to keep her post throughout her degree and gained promotion. Fiona, whose teaching qualification is in a shortage area, gained promotion too, and Debra has moved into a management post. Clara is also certain the Access course and subsequent degree enabled her to improve her situation, although her post is supported by short-term funding.

It could be argued that, as degrees per se improve employment prospects, there is an indirect rather than a direct link between the Access courses and employment for those Access course students who gain degrees. However Jenny is sure that she could not have done a degree without the Access course.

Self-employment is an alternative which two students have tried. In 2000 Trevor tried self-employment after a brief and unsuccessful attempt at an HE course. Married with a young child at school and in receipt of invalidity benefit, he originally thought of A level science courses, but after conversations with advisers in student services and the Access course leader decided on Access to Science. He completed and passed the course in 1995. His book selling business became too complex, although initially he earned well from it. Since his first unsuccessful attempt at HE, he has attempted other courses, has not finished some but did complete a first aid qualification. Although Trevor did not progress to HE, he considers the Access course to be a success for him, as it gave him 'a structure in life' and knowledge of IT which he now uses in his work as a youth worker. Colin is also partially self-employed but his after-school sports clubs are only a 'sideline'. His portfolio of work uses his skills but no part is

permanent. Nevertheless he thinks that has been successful in his employment.

Of the nine Science students interviewed five are known to be currently in work, as are all eight of the Humanities and the one Modular student. All of the students are working in the public or voluntary sector: none in industry. As, at the time of the research, the two largest employers in the town were the borough council, and the local hospital trust this may reflect employment patterns in the town. However, it may also reflect the gender bias of the group: only 2 of the 14 students traced in the later stages of this research were male. There is also a bias in the research towards those in employment. This mirrors the difficulty which other researchers such as Munn, *et al* (1993) found in tracing students. Without a more pro-active attitude to research in colleges it is unlikely that these flaws will easily be addressed. Without such research, constructing success criteria around employment would be difficult.

Wider perspectives and personal development

The Science course submission stated that ‘In addition to preparation for HE courses, the course aims include ‘enhance career and employment opportunities’, ‘boost confidence’, and ‘enhance the personal and vocational lifestyle of the student’’. (College submission document for Access to HE (Science) 1994, original punctuation). So from a course perspective these themes are obviously important. The two themes have been considered together as much of the evidence overlaps.

Chris who was one of the students who did not progress to HE said that the science course was a ‘brilliant course which changed my philosophy of looking at things – nature, life.’ Trevor who tried HE unsuccessfully also reported wider perspectives in that he now reads *New Scientist* and he knows ‘the technical terms in newspapers’. Carol says she is now ‘no longer content to read women’s magazines’ and that the access course has changed her perspective. Colin says that the Access course he took gave

him a ‘passion for biology and physiology’, and that he now has to be ‘dragged from Waterstones’.

In a slightly different context Bridget and Joan changed their minds about the HE course they wanted to do. Bridget found Sociology so interesting that she read this for her degree and Joan is taking Forensic Science with Criminology. She identifies a ‘big-style’ change in herself. Trevor says the course made him ‘get out of bed’ and he sees the Access course as the beginning of his recovery from ‘three years of severe depression’.

The daytime course leader thinks that the course ‘prepares them for change – whatever that might be (it does differ between individuals.)’ However, the evening course leader, who has been involved with Access courses in the college for 13 years thinks that she has seen a decrease in the openness of the students to change, and that fewer students are being ‘transformed’ by the course. Joan, who was one of the latest students to take the course, would appear to contradict this. Personal development is a broader concept than confidence, which is considered below, as it includes time management, organisational skills, relationship with peers and staff and personal change.

Confidence

All of the women interviewed talked about an increase in confidence, whether this was the confidence to engage in an HE course (Carol), the confidence in her ability (Lena) or a more all round personal confidence ‘Once you get that little bit you know you can do it’ (Joan). The men were less likely to mention this spontaneously although the male author of the first letter quoted above did.

The course leaders all see increased confidence as one of the major benefits of Access courses. ‘Access courses are designed to enable adult learners to improve their academic skills and increase their confidence levels to allow them to undertake self-selected training and/or further education’ (Daytime Access leader). The moderators, too, identify this as a major factor in

courses: 'general confidence building' being identified as a success by one, while for another the course are worthwhile as students can say 'I can do it!' (Moderator 1)

Even one of the two students who had left the 1996-7 Science Access program mentioned confidence in a response to a postal questionnaire about the reason for leaving.

I enjoyed the course emensly and I think it gave me the confidence to attend college and further my education in the future, but other commitments and some unforeseen circumstances mean't that I had fell to far behind with work and had not gave the course my best. (Student 2, course records, original punctuation and spelling)

Confidence was also cited as a success criterion by two students who were in the 2000-1 cohort. As part of the Modular Access course I run a module for those who, at the beginning of the course in September, express an interest in teaching. The module is at level 2 and counts towards their Access certification. The specific aim of the course is to help those who, almost immediately after joining, have to apply for university entry. The competitive nature of entry to teaching courses in the area makes this advisable although the entry system does allow for later applications. The module also provides an opportunity for some to discover that teaching is not for them. One activity near the end of the course is a role-play exercise involving preparing and answering questions which may be asked at interviews. One student's question to the others was 'How would you measure your success on this course?' When we had finished the activity I asked if, before they left the course, they would write their answers down for me, explaining why I was interested. Confidence was mentioned in two out of three of the answers which I subsequently received.

Since starting the course in September, I have gained lots of self-confidence and formed many friendships.
(Student A)

My confidence and personal skills (including ability to organise and time management) have been boosted and I have met several people, some of whom are now personal friends. My self-esteem has also grown and I know that I can now cope well with university and many other previously daunting prospects. (Student B)

At the end of the course the Modular course leader carries out an evaluation using a nominal group technique (NGT). This technique has the advantage 'that it generates issues that are important to the students themselves, rather than generating answers to questions posed by the evaluator' (Chapple & Murphy, 1996 p. 8). Students are asked individually to identify three strengths and weaknesses of the course. These are pooled, discussed and voted on. Students have three votes for both aspects, rated as 3, 2, 1, in order of importance to them. Although the questions asked in the evaluations are different from the questions asked in this research, students do not necessarily see them as different. An example of an evaluation from 2000-1 is shown in Table 4.7. It can be seen that the issues raised are very similar to those which came from interviews. Headings without scores against them indicate topics which were initially raised by the students but were not voted for at the end of the process.

It is always difficult to interpret the categories raised in NGT after the event: some are not entirely clear and sometimes appear contradictory. For example 'focus' is quoted as a weakness but 'development of concentration' which would appear to be similar as a strength. Nor is it clear how many students contributed to this evaluation carried out at the end of the course. Nevertheless there is a very high score for 'confidence' as a strength of the course, particularly as it seems to appear twice, presumably one being personal and the other academic confidence. The next highest is 'achievement'. The students thus seem to be valuing personal development over academic attainment. However, it should be noted that the students who participated were those who were retained and those who had left would have a different perspective.

Table 4.7 Nominal group technique: Access evaluation Summer 2001
Strengths and weaknesses of the course

Strengths		Weaknesses	
Time management	1	Accepting feedback	1
Organisational skills	1	Understanding academic structures	1
Knowledge/interests	1	Availability of environment	1
Confidence/ability	9	Stress management	11
Broadened interests	4	Awareness of limitations	11
Enjoyed learning	1	External commitments	7
Self-awareness	2	Fear of failure	4
Encouragement (tutors/peers)		Deadlines	8
New ideas/new concepts	2	Focus	3
Listen to others	1	Lack of common room	1
Confidence	11	Workload excessive	
Achievement	8		
Development of concentration	1		
Being able to finish	1		
Commitment	11		
Determination	3		

On-course support

One of the strengths of the course that students identified which does not feature in the managerialist discourse of retention, achievement and progression is on-course support. This does feature in inspections (OFSTED and ALI, 2001) at both course and college level, and thus contributes to the assessment by inspectors of the college and course as successful or otherwise. So this would appear to be an important criterion in judging the success of the course. At a cross-college level, the college has always scored highly on this criterion. It would appear from student comments that at both a course and a personal level on-course support is good. Siobhan says it was 'brilliant'. Joan 'didn't realise that there was so much help'. Three unsolicited letters from past students were included in Access course documentation prepared for a recent inspection. These are reproduced below.

Just a few words to update you on what I've been up to in the last 3 years. Basically, I achieved the 2:1 at Durham which I was aiming for. After a sticky start I improved every year and wasn't a million miles from a 1st (second year cost me). Tomorrow (Wed) I start an M.Sc in Developmental Psychopathology still at Durham (main campus this time).

Eventually I would like to be an Educational Psychologist (I have a few irons in the fire), there is also an outside chance that I may be offered a funded P.Hd (sic.) place next year.

I hope you don't think that I am writing to brag. I am instead writing to thank you, as there is no way I would be doing what I'm doing now if it wasn't for you. When I entered your class 5 years ago (A level), if I hadn't enjoyed it I wouldn't have taken education any further. It was you who convinced me to apply for the Access course and then

uni. More importantly you taught me that the only limit on me was me (something I still remember today). you helped me change my life and for that I am eternally grateful.

P.S. If I told you this to your face you would probably tell me to 'Stop being silly' so I decided to write instead.

P.P.S. Please also thank for me as they played their part.

(Student 1, male)

Thank you all very much,, all the access team, if it wasn't for all of you I would not be where I am today, and giving me the confidence in myself and the determination to go for University. I can't believe I am here now. Thank you with all my heart, I think you are an excellent team.

(Student 2, female)

I really want you to know how grateful I am for your help and encouragement in getting me to university. I got so much confidence from your Access course and I've thoroughly enjoyed my first year at Riverside. The course people and lifestyle are all great and I'm looking forward to starting my second year. I'm sorry it has taken me so long to do this but you deserve all the credit for getting me there in the first place. I'll let you know how I get on.

Thanks again.

(Evening access to HE student Sep '94 - June '96, female)

All three talk about the excellence of the support, but like all the Humanities and Modular Access students interviewed they are successful students.

The Science external examiner also clearly identified support as a strength of the course.

A significant and invaluable contribution to the programme is the tutorial support, which is available and which students greatly appreciate. I congratulate the College in putting in place an excellent system for tutorial support and the teaching staff should be praised for their obvious significant input to the tutorial support system.
(Course report, 1995-6)

The moderator for the modular course went further: 'Tutors in FE colleges are the unsung heroes of the English education system.' (Moderator 1)

Civic Participation

This theme emerged at a late stage, citizenship having been identified by practitioners as a benefit of courses in FE colleges (Preston and Hammond, 2002). However there was no agreement about what this term meant. McGivney (2002) considers 'social progression' and 'civic participation' as part of this. Three of the students interviewed are involved in activities which could come under this heading. Alan is now a school governor and helps out at another local school. Lena is working with the Youth Justice Board and also helping at a school. Carol did some volunteer work in health education between university and taking up a post as a teaching assistant. Their involvement in these activities began after their Access courses were completed, but it is difficult to ascertain whether this involvement can be considered a consequence of following an Access course. McGivney (2002) points out that this is a general problem with 'softer outcomes', as is the time scale over which they are to be judged. Any success criteria based on outcomes such as civic participation would have inherent difficulties in separating the contribution of the Access course from the contribution from other factors such as maturation and changes in domestic circumstances.

Implications

From the analysis above it can be seen that courses can be claimed to be successful from a variety of perspectives, both at a course level and a more personal one. But from a managerialist perspective two main problems are raised. The first is the difficulty of collecting valid statistics. This, of course, also has implications for funding bodies. The second is that, as the qualitative data illustrates, the statistics need interpretation. Both of these difficulties raise questions about valid criteria for success which will be addressed in the final chapter.

How successful are Access courses?

What this research shows is that the answer to the main research question is not simple. The answer to the question ‘How successful are Access courses?’ depends partly on the criteria used to judge success but also to some extent on who is asking the question and why. For example, the College Principal and Chief Executive who celebrates student achievement and the success of the Access course in the September Celebration of Achievement ceremony is also the manager who later in the month will be analysing the review and evaluation document for the course which the students followed, and who earlier in the month questioned the viability of the next cohort of the same course. The course leader, celebrating alongside the completing students and the Principal, had to justify the dropout from the cohort when completing the review and evaluation documentation at the end of the academic year, and also had to consider carefully as interviews were carried out for the next year, whether or not the college’s commitment to open enrolment was to be maintained. These difficulties are not new in education: similar questions are raised in all debates about accountability (see Becher and Maclure, 1978).

From some perspectives the situation may appear simple. For example, for an auditor working on behalf of the LSC the criteria for success may be straightforward and for some students too, even if like Lena the criteria do not match those of the QAA. Bromley (2002) had another perspective in a recent major survey by the Learning and Skills Development Agency, funded by the LSC. The purpose of her project was to

investigate Access provision in Further Education Colleges (FECs) in England and assist the LSC in determining the importance of access provision and its appropriateness in the current portfolio of qualifications, particularly in the light of the Higher Education (HE) participation targets for 2010.
(op. cit. p. 2 original punctuation.)

Judged by the criterion of widening participation to HE, she considers that Access courses are not successful. She also considers that funding both for the courses and students needs to be increased, and that action needs to be taken 'to ensure that a higher proportion of students who successfully complete Access course progress to HE' (op. cit. p. 27). One of her recommendations is that a new national strategy for Access needs to be developed. If this strategy is developed with widening participation as the only criterion of success, no account would be taken of student perspectives. Bromley's project was carried out in a short time scale of less than six months and did not gather any evidence from students. This research suggests that one must look both at the success of the courses themselves and students' individual success, and that the voice of the students is critical.

Before turning to the main research question 'In what ways are Access courses 'successful'?' it is useful to look at each of the subsidiary questions. These were:

By what criteria are courses said to be successful, and from whose perspective?

What is the student understanding of success, and do different students have different perspectives?

Are there changes in the student perceptions over time?

Have these Access courses allowed students to undertake further 'successful' study as intended?

Additional questions have arisen during the research:

If a combination of criteria is used, whose criteria are dominant and why?

Over what time scale should criteria be drawn?

In what ways can statistics gathered for management purposes contribute to considerations of success?

I shall consider each of these questions separately using a different order from that used in chapter one and will consider success both of the courses and students themselves.

These questions will be considered in the light of the two dominant discourses identified and discussed earlier. One is the managerialist discourse which is closely linked to that of funding providers and governmental concerns. The second dominant discourse stems from the liberal humanist tradition. Each discourse acknowledges the existence of others but is driven by different concerns, and both are used by practitioners.

What is the student understanding of success and do different students have different perspectives?

In this research a total of 23 students were interviewed. It is clear that even from this limited sample that there were at least two significant and different student perspectives. Some students looked at Access as an end in itself; others saw it as a means to a further end such as better employment or access to further study. So, there were those such as Lena, Trevor and Eric who did not go on to HE but nevertheless felt that the course provided elements of success: increased confidence, better psychological health or a demonstration of ability. From their perspective this counted as success.

From a different perspective, Marie, who also did not go on to university, found that the course improved her employment prospects. In contrast, others such as Carol and Colin have graduated from university and improved their employment opportunities. Joan is still enthusiastically pursuing her university course. From their perspective, their progression was a success. But these two perspectives are quite different.

It should be noted that neither of these significant student perspectives matches completely the criteria of other interested groups. Bloomer and Hodgkinson (1999) looking at the 16-19 age group in FE point out that it is necessary to 'accept that student and college wants do not always coincide' (p. 114). Certainly Lena, Trevor, Eric and Marie do not fulfil the QAA's primary criterion of progression to HE, but from their perspective they achieved success.

All the students interviewed saw success as a personal, individual issue - none of them commented in any way on the courses' achievement or retention. Two did comment on their cohort's progression to HE. Corin pointed out that he was the only one of the first science cohort we were certain had graduated, and Katy commented that a large number of her cohort had gone to HE. For both however it was the personal factors which were most important. The three students who wrote about success in response to a question from one of their peers also saw success as a personal issue, one talking about future employment as well as self-confidence.

The students interviewed were a limited and uncontrolled sample in the case of the science students, and an opportunistic sample in the case of the humanities students. The latter group was all female, as were the modular students who were also were a limited and uncontrolled sample. So although different students had different perspectives not all possible perspectives are represented in this research, for example that of male humanities students. Further, those who did not progress to HE could not comment on preparation for HE. The course and mode of attendance do not appear to have made any significant difference to the students' perspectives.

Have these Access courses allowed students to undertake further 'successful' study as intended?

For those interviewed who had completed degrees the answer is obviously 'yes'. However data for the graduation of past students is incomplete: there appears to be no efficient and reliable method for colleges to track students through HE. The LBOCN tracking is as yet no more reliable: limited to the north-east HEIs, it 'loses' students who move outside the area and those who do not immediately progress to HE, and has not followed students to graduation. At a national level there is inconsistency between HEIs in recording and tracking Access students (private communication) and the UCAS database relies on applicants' information. These data are limited to enrolments in HE. There are no national figures for subsequent completion. So neither at a local nor at a national level do the data allow a satisfactory answer to be given.

It was presumed when framing this question that further study meant study at HE level. This research has demonstrated that not all future study is at this level. Lena followed a GCSE maths course, Marie returned to college to take a vocational teaching course without first going to university. Carol and Bridget also completed courses of these types, but after their degrees.

If questions of this kind are to be asked in future, 'further study' must be more clearly defined, as must the idea of 'success' in relation to further study. Any attempt to answer this question for HE courses needs to be underpinned by a much more robust data collection system which tracks individual students throughout their HE courses. Any system such as this would have to be at university rather than college level, and data protection issues would have to be addressed very early in the student's university career.

Although the QAA statistics database has become more sophisticated since this research began, there are still uncertainties in the data for entrants to HE with Access qualifications. For example, for a given cohort, there is no distinction between those who gained their qualifications in the year of entry to HE and those who gained the qualification in previous years. Although, in general, the increased sophistication is useful, changes in accounting make long term comparisons difficult.

In colleges, the main purpose of management information is accountability for funding purposes rather than recording the progress of individual students. At college level, for example, the data on the employment (or unemployment) status of an individual student is disaggregated from the individual student record. While this separation may persuade more students to provide the data which is required for funding purposes, the separation does not aid the longitudinal research which is needed to underpin more systematic reviews both of Access courses and students individually, and of course of other courses too. Thus, from a research perspective more valid quantitative data is required that has more rigour than managerial statistics.

Are there changes in the student perceptions over time?

The research was limited in scale and time. If there are changes, there can be no certainty that the Access course caused them. The student who had the longest gap between finishing her course and being interviewed was Bridget who was an Access humanities student from 1990-1. She gave me permission to reproduce material from an essay she wrote in the context of a teacher training course which she took over 10 years later. It shows some change in her views over time and she does suggest that this is due to the Access course. Although the extract is long it has been included in this concluding chapter as it has relevance to several questions. She called it *A new beginning (experiences of Access)*.

Following my compulsory education there was a gap in my formal education due to family and economic commitments. In 1990 ... I decided to return to full time education. My aim was to take a year from employment in order to gain an access qualification to allow me to enter nursing training. It was at this point that my education became both fulfilling and enjoyable (everything seemed to have a purpose). I was very nervous about returning to education after such a period of time and the negative experiences I had encountered in my compulsory schooling. At that time I, had a particular view of the learning process ... the act of teaching is a simple process: it is to give or impart knowledge. ... But on the access course I could see that education was more than this, it would be about sharing not disseminating, collaborating not politicising, and most of all it could be both an enjoyable experience and a fulfilling development in my academic learning. ... There was less emphasis on the competitive aspect of passing tests and positional grading within the classroom. I felt that the only person I had to prove myself to was I.

There was an unthreatening atmosphere within the class and all students were encouraged to participate in class discussion (or were covertly encouraged to participate by the clever tactics of the tutor). It is these tactics that I find myself employing with my students (why reinvent the wheel)? I enjoyed ... the course, so much so that I continued my education at university where I graduated with a 2.1 honours degree ...

When arriving at University I felt very intimidated by my younger peers. ... It was not long, however, that I realised that my learning experience on the Access course had prepared me much more appropriately than those who had arrived directly from A Level courses. I had developed my analytical skills to a higher level than those from the normal route had. I also had developed the ability to criticise and empathise with peers in a more mature and utilitarian way.

My learning experience at university was very much of an independent nature, we were encouraged to read and research in the library ... However, I would have found this aspect of learning much more difficult had I not had the relevant preparation given to me by my Access tutors. After gaining my degree, I also gained an Teaching Certificate ...

On the whole my views of the Access course are very positive and I would recommend this route to further education to other potential students. ... This is a personal view and one that is seen through both a learner and teaching experience, but had it not been for the professionalism and dedication of tutors on my return to

formal education I may not have found myself teaching today. (Bridget, abridged but not edited)

In this extract it is possible to see a change of career intention and changing views of education and teaching. She also acknowledges the support of her tutors, describes the skills she gained which helped her in her university course and points out that her view is a personal one. So in Bridget's case there seem to be changes in perspective of success from the end of her Access course to ten years later when she was interviewed for this research, from the pursuit of qualifications to the development of confidence and skills, allowing her to benefit from HE. If this is true in the case of Bridget, might it be also true for other students? In order to determine whether this is the case, further longitudinal research is needed. The QAA major review of Access provision, to be published in 2004, does not appear to include any interviews with former Access students who have completed subsequent courses nor any who have not progressed to HE. This issue which appears to be a major area for future research will be discussed in more detail later.

Over what time scale should criteria be drawn?

If the criterion of success is completion, then the time scale need only be one year. If the criterion is progression to HE and completion of a higher level course, then the time scale changes to four or more years. If the criterion is appropriate and improved employment, local circumstances suggest that a similar long time scale is needed. For Plewis and Preston's (2001) wider benefits, a longer time scale is again required. However, the longer the time scale, the greater the problems cited above of flawed data and untraced students. As has been noted above, student perspectives may change over time, so there are complex factors to consider.

All the questions considered so far in this chapter have looked particularly at the student perspective. The questions which follow look at a broader perspective.

In what ways can statistics gathered for management purposes contribute to considerations of success?

The numbers involved in the research are small and small differences of one or two students can cause large variations in overall statistics. From management statistics, there do not appear to be any significant differences between the courses studied, nor between male and female students. The College statistical data were limited and lacked continuity as management information systems changed during the course of the research. The data inform considerations of success in so far as they satisfy the requirements of the LSC, but in what ways do they inform the considerations of managers?

There are balancing acts for the senior managers in the institution. While constrained by the funding concerns of enrolment, retention and achievement, at Westland College the Principal also once a year at least, celebrates the success of students in a different way as was illustrated by Fig. 1.1. Before incorporation, in 1991 one of the college's assistant principals noted in an unpublished MBA dissertation on the management of change that, 'both performance indicators and learning outcomes are in their own way important in Adult Education' (private communication). A further area for investigation leading from this research is how senior managers in colleges view 'success' and reconcile conflicting viewpoints in the current funding regime. As this work ends I am still attending meetings with managers where we, as staff, are chided for the inadequate provision of statistics needed for funding purposes but told at the meeting that it is 'the learner who counts',

College senior managers require a minimum number to run courses, urge retention and achievement, yet, unlike other local colleges, only charge Access students a fee of £15 per year in order to reduce barriers. Course leaders, who are considered to be middle managers, when interviewing students talk of courses in terms of confidence-building and personal development, yet realise that the courses will not run without sufficient enrolments. Certainly for senior managers funding requirements suggest that the main criteria must be performance indicators, but for course leaders

who are more directly concerned with students the answer is not so clear cut. While the 'simple' statistics of enrolment, retention, achievement and progression are important there are other issues.

As well as the data mentioned above, more information is collected from students at enrolment on address, ethnicity, nationality and disabilities. However, even in the review and evaluation process, only the 'simple' statistics are reviewed at course level. The 'harder' statistics, such as mode of attendance, gender, class and age, could be analysed to inform reviews of the courses in a more sophisticated way and thus support or refute any claims made by staff for the success in widening participation. A more complex issue is that of previous qualifications. The diverse nature of the student body makes 'value-added' considerations difficult, but nevertheless it should be possible to devise a system to code students' entry qualifications and monitor these with respect to the 'simple' statistics. The students interviewed had very diverse backgrounds from A-levels or professional qualifications such as quantity surveying to no formal qualifications at all, so the view of their achievement and progression must be related to their entry qualifications. Any assessment of the success and progression of students should take this into account. This would also inform recruitment and guidance to students, so would be of benefit in practice to staff and students. The College data management systems would allow more sophisticated analyses but any such analyses would have to be driven and supported by management and carried out by suitably experienced personnel. The College's management information officer is sure that such analyses are feasible (private communication). A more sophisticated analysis of management statistics would also all also determine whether the courses are recruiting and retaining both male and female students, and those from a variety of backgrounds.

By what criteria are courses said to be successful and from whose perspective?

Different criteria are used in different discourses. Managers, tutors, students and politicians do indeed all have different viewpoints, and it is from this

diversity that some of the questions underpinning this research came. The dominant criteria depend on the starting point from which they are viewed. Students want the qualification, but some enthuse, both in this research and that of others about the empowerment they receive, (Williams and Bristow, 1988). Others talk of increased confidence. They also praise the commitment and professionalism of the course teams. There is no doubt that the primary concerns of the institution are enrolment, retention, achievement and progression – these are the data that have to be collected, analysed and commented on at during all courses, and for which targets must be set. And these are the figures, which at a whole college level, are reported to the LSC and on which funding is based. For the LSC widening participation is also a funding criterion, and so it is also a college one. For Access courses these are also the figures that concern the local validating agency that collates and publishes them. All of these ‘agencies’ are viewing success criteria from a macroscopic view: the success of the course as a whole as opposed to success of individuals.

External examiners/moderators are concerned with achievement too, but for them it is academic standards rather than numbers that are the concern. As all of the external examiners/moderators are or have been university lecturers it is not surprising that they viewed preparation for HE as a major factor. They also commented on student support as a strength of the course.

In contrast, while the course team were also concerned about the factors discussed above, they put more emphasis on the confidence gained by the students and their personal development. So did the students, who as noted above viewed success from a personal perspective, not a course one.

Table 5.1 summarises the criteria used by different groups. The summary shows clearly the lack of overlap between criteria used at high levels. It also shows that the different criteria meet at the level of the course team and students. This illustrates the dilemmas facing course teams in trying to satisfy a range of, often competing, criteria.

Table 5.1 Success criteria

	QAA	Funding agencies	Institution	External examiners	Course team	Students
Enrolment	not an issue	16	12	-	course runs	course runs
Retention		high % of Nov 1 enrolment	high % of original enrolment	-	those who will benefit from the course	completion
Achievement	desirable	high % of original enrolment	high % of finishing students	academic quality	100% of finishing students	individual success
Widening participation		funding implications,	desirable	useful	desirable	?
Progression	primary aim	funding implications	desirable	high value	desirable	main aim
Preparation for HIE		in theory	stated aim	major importance	major aim	required
Confidence		not an issue	not an issue	useful	increased	increased
Enjoyment		not an issue	not an issue	useful	desirable	bonus
Personal development		not an issue	in theory	cited as positive feature	course aim	minor aim
Student support	government emphasis	funding, charter issue	charter issue	cited as positive feature	essential but time consuming	high value

The research shows that the criteria used depend on the perspective chosen, and the perspective depends on the discourse used. Two main discourses were identified: the managerialist and the liberal humanist. These are illustrated in Fig. 5.1. This pictures the two discourses set at opposite ends of a seesaw. The pivot of the seesaw is seen as the students. The diagram is simplistic in implying that practitioners, both managers and the course team, must be located at one end or another of a spectrum, as in practice they are continually sliding along a continuum, and in doing so can tilt the seesaw in one direction or the other. As well as the criteria discussed in the previous section the diagram also incorporates some of the long term benefits mentioned by McMahon (1998) and Plewis and Preston (2001).

The concerns of the managerialist discourse stem from the demands of the QAA and the LSC. The liberal/humanist discourse concerns lifelong learning, widening participation and the individual, arising from this discourse's liberal roots. But lifelong learning and widening participation also form part of the managerialist discourse, if seen from the perspective of the 'economic good' of the country. And outcomes such as progression and retention form part of the liberal/humanist discourse in its concern with the development of the individual. When coming to judge if a course is successful there is tension between the two discourses which needs to be recognised. The tension between the two discourses is focused in the students who are concerned both with outcomes and the process by which they gain those outcomes.

This is illustrated by a conversation which arose during the time in 2002 when the course teams were reviewing the course for the previous academic year and interviewing students for the next. The course team leader (who is deliberately not identified) was talking about the issue of widening participation and open enrolment, and the tension that arises from the conflict between this ideal and resulting achievement.

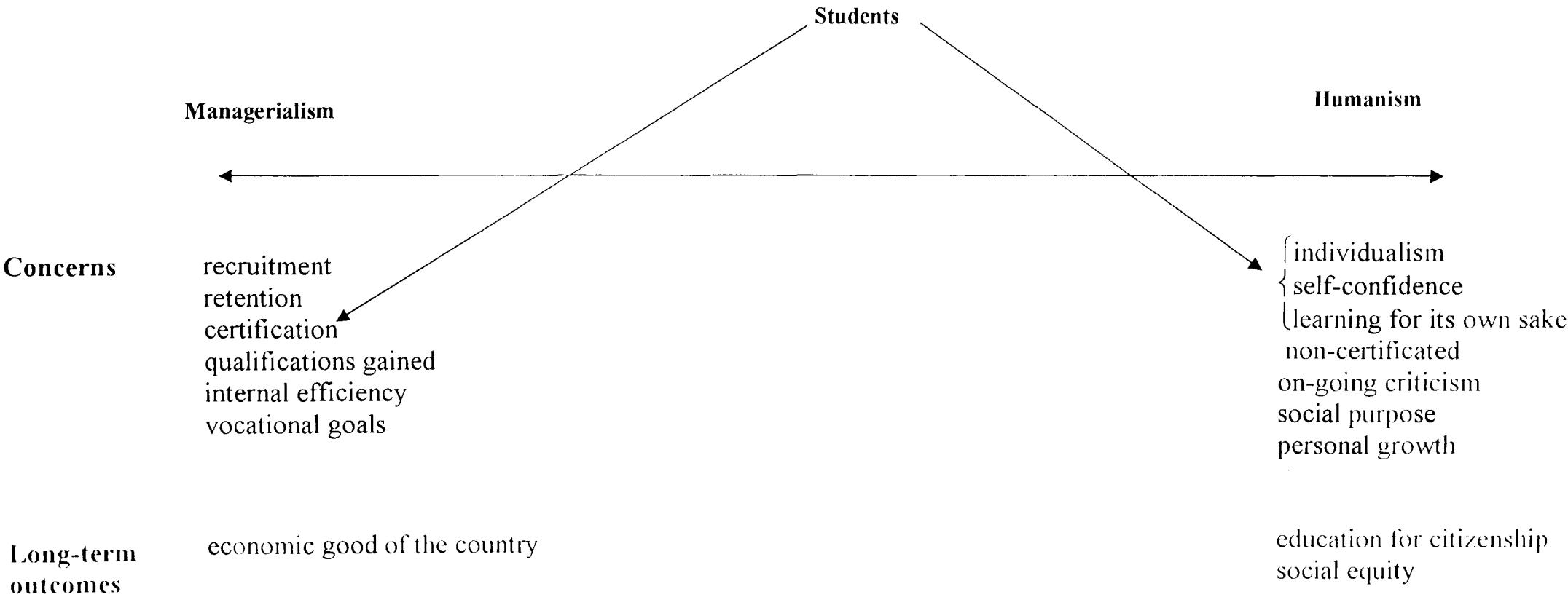
I believe that all students should be offered the chance of a place on the course, if it is the right course for them. I don't

‘lose’ any students I interview. I try to pass them on to another course if Access isn’t the right one. But when people start questioning my results, then it is my job on the line and I have to think about that.

This questioning of results is making the course leader question the current policy of no formal entry requirements for the course. Gleeson and Shain (1999) think that middle managers adopt an ‘approach of strategic compliance in dealing with pressures from above and below while, at the same time, maintaining a commitment to educational and professional values in support of student care and collegiality’ (p. 488). The course leader’s comment above may indicate that, at least, for this leader, when s/he has to define the ‘success’ of the course in terms of statistics, the balance is shifting to the managerialist discourse from a liberal belief that it is student ‘success’ that matters. It also illustrates what Gleeson and Shain (1999) call ‘artful self preservation’ (p. 489). Emerging from this research is a spectrum of success criteria which go beyond new managerialist concerns but are not entirely ‘softer’. The situation, particularly for middle managers, is more complex than mere polarisation and again illustrates that there is a complicated relationship between student and course success.

Figure 5.1

A framework or a tightrope? The Access balancing act?



If a combination of criteria is used

There appears to be no easy way to combine institutional course level measures of success with the individual and hard-to-measure criteria of students. Each group focuses on its own concerns: the institution on the course, the students on the personal. Course teams may value the harder-to-measure criteria, but record the statistics. The Government inspection framework looks at personal learning goals and satisfaction (Ofsted and ALI, 2001), but does not grade these.

Since the institution decides whether or not a course will run, the institution's instrumental criteria would appear to be dominant. But courses can only run if students enrol. So if past students, such as Bridget, recommend courses to friends and acquaintances because of the support they received, their increase in confidence or their increased employment prospects, they help to meet institutional criteria. A hidden factor in the continuing success of courses is the informal advertising by past students, which can be positive or negative. So students' perceptions of the success of courses for them are important to the future running of courses. It should be noted that nowhere in this research has learning been raised by students as a criterion for the success of the courses. It might appear that the more rigorous quantitative data analysis suggested in sections above would only be of benefit to managers, but increased awareness of the factors affecting student enrolment and achievement could be used to target student support more effectively.

Having drawn out a variety of criteria from different perspectives, this research suggests that a combination of criteria could be used to provide a balanced view of success which takes into account both the student individual perspective and whole course aspects too.

In what ways are Access courses ‘successful’?

The courses run, students are satisfied, some students progress to HE, and the College celebrates their achievement. It seems that the courses are successful from a variety of perspectives. However, if one looks more closely and examines the criteria by which these courses are to be judged 'successful', there is no simple answer to the above question and more questions are raised. For example, comparison with other courses, internally and externally, is difficult, but is necessary for funding purposes.

This research has shown that even in one institution there is no single definition of success, and no easy way of measuring or understanding it. Whether a course is successful or not depends on the definition of success used to judge it. As ‘success’ is a contested concept, the question of success is not one that it is reasonable to ask without a definition. That definition must be derived from the context of the course and will inevitably be contested.

From this research it is possible to conclude that the college courses had success in providing progression to HE for students, as they sent a higher percentage of students to HE than the local average. So qualified success could be claimed. But the local data were flawed. The views of the students interviewed were that the courses were successful for them as individuals. But the sample was limited. Those who dropped out may have different views, but these are hard to determine. Course leaders think that the courses are successful but acknowledge that there is a high dropout rate. External examiners think that the courses attain appropriate academic standards but external examiners are focussed on HE.

Research validity

Having analysed the findings of the research it is now appropriate to turn to the validity and relevance of the research. In this research there were particular problems, such as the effect I as a researcher had on interview

responses. However, there was an engagement over time as well as interviews, which enabled triangulation by reviewing commonality between student accounts, staff accounts and statistical records. Given more time additional methods such as attitude questionnaires and focus groups could have been used to build up triangulation further. The problem of both of these methods for the current research lies in the response rate and time commitment for students, and also the time scale over which the research was to be carried out. The response rate to a postal survey in some preliminary research was very poor, and the research time scale did not allow for the longer period of time needed for good focus group-based research. Thus it was decided to use more engagement through interviews to give deeper insights. As discussed earlier, Hammersley (1998) suggests three stages of plausibility, credibility and, if necessary, reviewing the evidence for judging the claims and conclusions of qualitative research, followed by an examination of relevance. These are considered below.

Plausibility

The main research question is one which is clearly of importance, Capizzi (1996), Munn, *et al* (1994), the LBOCN (2002) and Bromley (2002) have all asked similar questions. The contexts in which they asked their questions are different from the present research. Capizzi (1996) surveyed data from national sources. She acknowledged that these data were problematical. Her research into 'success' was limited to 'effectiveness' which she defined as 'successful completion and progression' (p. 54) Munn, *et al*, (1994) looked at the Scottish programme which, as has been explained, differs from the English system in having a national rather than a local framework. The LBOCN (2002) work did look at the local situation but only considered progression, and then only to local HEIs, and as explained earlier there were flaws in the data. Although Bromley (2002) surveyed the English system using ISR data and a questionnaire sent to 60 colleges, the views of students were not sought. The findings from this research, that there are differing perspectives from which to judge success, that students view success from a personal perspective, and that students'

views change over time, appear plausible, as there are sufficient similarities of findings between this work and that of others discussed above. The unreliability of data discovered at both college and AVA levels also appears plausible in the light of Capizzi's findings in 1996. The context and methodology of this present study and, within the study, the position of the researcher have been explained in order that the reader can judge this plausibility for themselves.

Credibility

The context in which the research claims and conclusions are set has been clearly described, so that readers can judge for themselves whether or not the work is credible. Triangulation was carried out wherever possible by comparing one student's account with another and students' accounts against other qualitative and quantitative data. Checks were made for internal consistency. The sample is acknowledged to be small, reflecting in part the nature of Ed. D. research. Although within the student data there is material from students who did not go to HE, there is very little from those who dropped out of the Access course or a subsequent HE course. This is a difficulty with research of this type and longitudinal research in general. Powney and Hall (1998) found similar problems. Karkalas and McKenzie (1995) surveyed students in the University of Glasgow's SWAP course. Their findings were similar to those here in that not all students wanted to go to HE, but again this work was within the Scottish system. A weakness of the present work is the lack of interview material from men who followed the Humanities and Modular courses. While this may have been due to the opportunistic sampling of students, it is also true that fewer male students maintain contact with the college or return to courses there. This is an avenue that could be explored in the future. The absence of men in this study made it impossible to examine differences in perceptions of success related to gender, except for the science students. It was not possible to do any useful analysis by age as there was insufficient data in college records.

Reviewing the evidence itself

Hammersley (1998) suggests that this third stage for testing validity may be required if it cannot be shown that the claims and conclusions drawn are plausible and credible. As the claims and conclusions do seem plausible and credible it does not seem necessary to review the evidence but leave it to those reading to make judgements as Hammersley (1998) suggests we do every day.

Relevance

As explained in chapter one, the main research question was and remains relevant at a number of different levels. For me as a tutor of adults on Access and other courses the question of success is one that concerns me directly. As a teacher involved in the education of post-16 vocational teachers it is a question to which I need to have clear answers as we explore adult learning in general, personal philosophies of teaching and barriers to learning. For my colleagues working on Access courses it is a question that occurs throughout the teaching year. The male student who came for interview with three young children in tow would not now be in his second year of teacher training if the Access team had not accepted him, and encouraged him to try again, despite the effect on course statistics, when his first two attempts at completing the course failed. For senior managers, constrained by funding concerns, the research question is equally important, as they have to justify to funding bodies the poor statistical returns which may result from the decisions such as the one described above. And for students the question is important at a course as well as individual level, as without courses of this type the routes for adults to access HE are more limited.

Generalisability

The issue of generalisability of any qualitative research is a matter of continuing debate, particularly for case studies (Gomm, *et al*, 2000). Bassey

(2001) introduced the concept of 'fuzzy generalisation' for empirical research, arguing that a more tentative generalisation than in sciences backed by professional judgement may be more appropriate for educational research, and may provide a guide to future professional actions. As a small piece of research the findings of this research cannot be generalised in any statistical manner. However, the work described here has added to my understanding of the operation of Access to HE courses in Westland College. The discussions with staff and students during the process of the work have raised interest and for some staff a re-examination of their perspectives. In addition some of the findings can be generalised to other adult courses in the department, some of which do not have accreditation. There are also parallels between the tensions raised here and those which have emerged in my work with teaching assistants in secondary schools, who are involved in working with pupils with special educational needs. For them there is a tension between the school's need to perform well in league tables and the needs of the individual pupils. Benjamin (2003) has reported a similar tension in schools in an English city.

Schofield (2000) suggests that 'a consensus seems to be emerging that for qualitative researchers generalizability (sic) is best thought of as a matter of 'fit' between the situation studied and others to which one might be interested in applying the concepts and conclusions of that study' (p. 93). I have indicated above two different situations where the conclusions made would 'fit'. Schofield goes on to say that in applying the concepts and conclusions sufficient information about the original study is essential in order to judge the degree of fit. In giving details of the students and the college context, this study has provided information for others to judge that fit. Lincoln and Guba (2000) also argue that fit is important. So while statistical generalisation cannot be claimed, the work may be generalised to other situations which 'fit'. However, there is a need for further research in such contexts to establish whether or not the 'fit' is good.

The findings of this research also fit with existing research findings for students on Access courses. For example, this research parallels the

findings of the SWAP research (Munn, *et al*, 1994) and that of Hull (1998) that Access students who proceed to university find that their courses have provided a satisfactory foundation. The research also ‘fits’ with that of Reay, *et al* (2002), in that determined students do eventually succeed in completing both their Access and subsequent courses.

Implications for policy

This research has shown that students have a different view of success from providers, and suggest there is a need for student perspectives to be considered in any criteria for success. As shown above student perspectives of the success of courses for them personally are important to the future running of courses. It would therefore seem sensible for more account to be taken of student interests. There are clear policy implications stemming from these findings if Access course in FE are to be taken seriously as part of the government lifelong learning and widening participation agenda. Working with Access students is rewarding but demanding: however it is clear that Access students and courses do not sit easily in established frameworks. Indeed FE colleges do not fit easily into the discourse of adult education (Edwards, 1997), generally being seen as technical colleges for young people. In addition, as Access courses are certificated they do not fit the ‘historic’ definition given by Usher and Edwards (1996) for adult liberal education. However, in that they attempt to address social inequality, they do (Wilkinson, 1999). As level 3 courses in the national qualification framework (NQF), the courses do not fit the current government emphasis on level 2 courses. Nevertheless Access course do have an important role in widening participation, another government agenda, and so should be taken seriously in policy considerations.

There are difficulties with quantitative data collected as a measure of success for Access courses. A consequence of this, as this research suggests is that there needs to be an extended and robust system of data collection which takes into account student perspectives. This would appear to be acknowledged by the LSC ‘Measuring Success in the Learning and Skills

Sector' (LSC, 2004) initiative which began after this research began. This initiative acknowledged the lack of national standards in measuring 'learner satisfaction' and destinations, as well as the lack of any 'value-added' system for adults, and put in place an extended consultation and implementation which is still continuing. The current recommendations, although moving some way towards a more standardised methodology for data collection, still do not remove the possibility of different implementation methods and lack of standardisation in interpretation by different providers, being in many cases recommendations rather than requirements. The suggested questions have an emphasis on delivery in terms of facilities and resources which are more easily quantified rather than the softer and longer term outcomes such as 'confidence' and 'helping children with homework' which have emerged from this research as important from a student perspective

At a broader policy level Plewis and Preston (2001) indicated that the LSC was to set up a database to track learners: this is now emerging as part of the 'Success for all' initiative. In the light of problems encountered in this research at institution and regional levels in the data that informs LSC and HEFCE records, there must be questions about the validity of any such database and any policy decisions or evaluations based on it. Any such database would need to consider the problems of aggregation of data and the cost in time and resources of any robust system. To take account of student perspectives, this research has shown that the system would need to track students, including those who do not proceed to higher education destinations for some years after the Access course ends and on into subsequent employment. It should also include 'softer' data. To make a system such as this transparent and robust would require policy decisions by government, and funding at an appropriate level.

Policy decisions are required, as the funding of adult courses themselves, including courses such as Access, appears to be in doubt because as they are at level 3 in the national qualification framework they do not fit the latest Government priorities for level 2 qualifications (Kingston, 2003). Bromley

(2002) commented on the need to determine the importance and appropriateness of Access courses in the light of the current HE participation targets. To view Access courses only in relation to their contribution to HE participation targets narrows the policy focus. This research shows that the contribution of Access courses to widening participation in HE is only one factor by which the success of Access courses should be judged. Hammersley (2002) suggests that the effects of research 'will be small, often indeterminate, and frequently difficult to trace' (p. 148). Although he was talking about practice rather than policy, it is hoped that a wider policy perspective would be of great benefit to Access course providers and the students they serve, for whom the courses themselves may have long term and difficult to trace consequences.

Implications for research

This research suggests that, although there is conflict over the importance of criteria, the perspectives on success of students and managers could be combined to provide a framework for the evaluation of the success of courses that takes into account the student as well as the managerialist perspective. However, development of satisfactory criteria for this framework is a matter for further research and discussion which should involve students and practitioners. This would require a readiness by those who determine policy to accept broader interpretations of achievement and progression, as McGivney (2002) suggests in her discussion of non-accredited courses. A change in policy would also be needed to recognise as valid some means of complementing the performance indicators currently used to judge success at course level, for example criteria derived from data collected by staff using techniques such as the nominal group technique discussed earlier and from data collected for the LSC National Learner Satisfaction survey.

From a research perspective, there is a potential for more rigorous quantitative longitudinal research in this area. To increase the validity of any such work, there would need to be much more rigour than in the

managerial data currently collected: students would need to be carefully tracked over a number of years. Those who drop out or do not progress to HE should be followed as well as all those who do progress to HE. At a different level a question was raised in discussion of this research about the differences, if any, in individual perspectives of success between students who are following vocationally directed courses, such as the science or IT ones and those following the more general humanities courses. Another question raised which could not be explored within this work was whether there are gender differences in perceptions of success. As has been noted there appeared to be changes in students' perspectives over time. For any further research the issue of time scale would certainly need to be addressed, as noted above. A longitudinal study of sufficient depth could follow students from their initial interview to at least a year after the completion of any HE courses. For part-time students that may be seven years. As this research found, there are implications self-selection, tracking and drop out. Findings from this study suggest that an even longer time scale would be needed to examine occupational trends thoroughly. To allow for dropout or non-progression to HE a large cohort of students would be needed, which suggests that that such research should be at AVA rather than college level. As funding for research in FE is very limited it is unlikely that research on questions such these will be carried out in the near future. However, research on Access course could be integrated with research on the wider benefits of learning which the Government is funding. The benefits of this data collection for students could be to provide a more balanced set of success criteria which meet the needs of the managerialist and liberal/humanist sectors and future students.

Implications for practice

Research on Access courses in FE colleges is limited and uncoordinated: the major project mentioned above (Bromley, 2002) has a bibliography limited to four authors apart from national statistics and similar reports. Part of the demand on practitioners is trying to respond to different perspectives of success. Hammersley (2002) suggests that for practitioners 'confirmation of

what's already believed can be valuable, where it increases the confidence we can reasonably have in these beliefs' (p. 150). For example, within the college, my increased understanding of the tensions between managerial systems and classroom delivery will certainly give me more confidence and inform my working with senior managers, course deliverers and students. Using data more constructively to review course operations in terms of gender, class and attendance will be an important outcome from this work, as. Reviewing course outcomes is increasingly important in FE and this research will inform these processes.

So what does this discussion say about the success criteria for students? Students appear to view success in personal terms rather than at course level. For them the success of the course is measured by their increased confidence as well as progression. Students appear to be interested in the results of their cohort and proud to be part of a 'successful' course.

To reflect the personal focus, any policy shifts or long-term research must include some investigation of criteria which are at an individual level rather than the aggregated level of most statistical data. However, to provide a basis for policy, data must be aggregated in some way, and must be collected systematically from a majority of students over the period from initial interview to post-completion. Data collection of this kind would be costly to administer and could be burdensome for staff as well as students. There would therefore need to be agreement that the potential benefits would outweigh the costs. However, a balance must be found between accountability and concerns for the wider development of individuals, which may well be served by more rigorous data collection and analysis, including the careful monitoring of equal equality data.

Conclusion

One reason for starting this research was, as a practitioner, to inform my teaching, in particular with PGCE/Cert. Ed. students and those who progress to the second year of a degree in Education and Training. This has certainly

happened: the content and direction of my teaching on the research methods module has been updated, moving beyond the prescribed recommended reading, as I have been able to disseminate recent research. This research will also inform my contributions to the imminent re-validation of both courses. In addition, the research has widened my critical perspectives on government policies and, in turn, informed my discussions with students, colleagues and managers. These effects may indeed be small and difficult to trace (Hammersley, 2002) but are nonetheless there.

Bromley (2002) talks about the importance and appropriateness of access courses in the light of widening participation in HE. Twenty-first century literature, such as McGivney (2002), and Preston and Hammond, (2002), on the outcomes of adult learning, whether accredited or not is still echoing Calder's (1993) concerns of a decade earlier. This research, on a very limited scale, has shown that students view success in different ways from course providers. For these students success is judged by diverse and different individual criteria: the completion of a course, the knowledge to help a son with homework, progression to different form of study (not necessarily HE), development of confidence and for some, secure employment. This research has shown that student criteria of success change even during the course.

Calder (1993) not only raised the concerns highlighted in chapter one which have been explored in this work, but also asked a pertinent question with which to end this research. 'Who is the customer whose expectations are to be satisfied?' (p. 137). For FE colleges, for managers, tutors and students the answer remains uncertain but nevertheless important. These courses, despite their difficulties from some perspectives, are successful, even if one uses the criterion implied in Eliot's *Family Reunion* 'Success is relative: it is what we can make of the mess we have made of things' (Eliot, 1969 p. 341), if only because for some students the outcomes are positive. Certainly for the student who has, as this research finally comes to a close, gained a position as a university lecturer the courses are definitely successful!

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Appendix 1

Science student questionnaire

Interview schedule

I would be grateful if you would help me with some research that I am doing on the success of Access courses. The research may be written as up part of a degree, and is with the Principal's approval. It would involve a meeting or telephone call to discuss how you have got on since you left college. Although I may use your comments in my report it would be anonymously; they will remain confidential and you can withdraw them at any time.

Date

What made you think about taking an Access course?

How did you find out about the course?

Was there anything in particular which made you consider returning to education?

What qualifications had you before you came on the course?

What guidance did you have in choosing a college course?

What long-term aim did you have in mind when you began the Access course?

What guidance did you have during the Access course about what you did next?

Did you have support (from family, partner or friends) during the course?

Could you tell me what you did after you left the Access course?

If Univ. Did you complete your course? What degree was it that you took?

Did the Access modules prepare you for the university course you took?

How easy did you find it to fit into university life?

Was there anything you weren't prepared for when you went to university?

In what ways did you enjoy the university course you took?

Can you tell me something about what you are doing now?

Are you still studying in any way?

Looking back on the Access course were there any things about the course that you particularly liked?

were there any things about the course that you particularly disliked?

Did the Access course change you in any way?

What are you planning to do next?

Do you have any information about other students from your year at HCFE?

Is there any thing else you would like to add?

Conclude with thanks and discussion about the possibility of viewing transcript.

Schedule for semi-structured interviews with humanities students

Date

Interview number

I would be grateful if you would help me with some research that I am doing on the success of Access courses. The research may be written up as part of a degree, and is with the Principal's approval. It would involve a meeting or telephone to discuss how you have got on since you left college. Although I may use your comments in my report it will be anonymously: they will remain confidential and you can withdraw them at any time.

Which year(s) did you take the access course? (Full-time or part-time?)

Can you tell me something about what you are doing now?

What did you do after the Access course? (Did you complete your course?)

Are you still studying in any way?

How easy was it to find work after you left the course(s)?

Did you have an aim in mind when you began the Access course?

Did the Access modules prepare you for the university course you took?

Was there anything in particular which made you consider returning to education?

Did you have enough guidance about choosing a college course?

(a university course?)

How easy did you find it to fit into university life?

In what ways did you enjoy the (university course) you took?

Looking back on the Access course can you identify any ways in which it was a successful course,

can you identify any ways in which it was not helpful?

Was there anything you weren't prepared for when you went to university?

What are you planning to do next?

Has the university/access course changed you in any way?

Do you have any information about other students from your year at HCFE?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Conclude with thanks and discussion about the possibility of viewing a transcript.

Prompt schedule for interviews with modular students

Interview introduction

I would be grateful if you would help me with some research that I am doing on the success of Access courses. The research may be written as up part of a degree, and is with the Principal's approval. It would involve a meeting or telephone call to discuss how you have got on since you left college. Although I may use your comments in my report it would be anonymously: they will remain confidential and you can withdraw them at any time.

Who?

Age

Gender

Social class/post code

Are you in part-time employment?

How many years is it since you were last in full-time education?

What is your highest academic qualification? e.g. GCSE, NVQ

Do you belong to any organisations? E.g. TWGI, Labour Party, photographic club, sports club

When did you last	read a complete book (not a text book), visit a theatre, cinema, hire a video, museum, exhibition?
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What?

What subjects are you studying at present?

Why?

Where did you find out about the course?

What made you come on an Access course?

Did any-one encourage you to take the course?

Did you have any doubts before starting the course?

What do you think you will do next year?

Did you have any career guidance before joining the course?

Is there any thing you would like to say about the course?

Conclude with thanks and discussion about the possibility of viewing a transcript.

Appendix 2 Extract from transcript of interview with Corin

Subject Yea. I mean, my only reservation there was go over what I already knew, but actually once I got into it I was quite surprised at how much I didn't know, and how much I'd actually forgot, you know. And if I hadn't took the Access course, I reckon me first year would have been much more difficult.

RW Yea. So you're saying without the Access course ...

*Preparation for
HE*

Subject Oh yea, because I mean, I went up there, and having done the Chemistry with XXXX, when I got up there they said 'Have you got A level Chemistry?' and I said 'No', then they said 'Right then you need to do a Chemistry module as a core module in the first year', because as they said it would have been Applied Biology with the Biochemistry side so I needed the Chemistry bit as well. And when I got in there me reaction was – for the first couple of like lecture I thought '..... I did that', 'cos if I hadn't done ... Chemistry, the area, I'd have been finished, I wouldn't have lasted. In fact I didn't last because I failed it first time round.

*Subject
content*

RW But the system means these days is you could do it again.

Subject I actually failed the Chemistry first time round and I went away very disappointed 'cos I was two percent short and because – I did well in the course work but it was – what he said he was 'You did brilliantly in the course work', he said 'but you were just a couple of points short of being close enough to give you a pass', so he said what I'd done I'd got all the wrong learning books, and I'd bought them all in the University, for three pound each or something, and I sat at home and worked through them. and did all the exams and all the tests.

RW Well that's interesting because that sounds as if you've carried some study skills over from you're A levels or Access or whatever. This ability to work independently.

Subject Well yea, the Access course give me that. The Access course itself give me what the University told me I would need as far as study skills were concerned, plus even though I was here it all came back very quickly. It wasn't as if I was struggling for any length of time because as soon as I started to study the Access course it just sort of came back from the A levels and O levels from years ago, and I was – 'Yea I remember how you did this now – this is the best way to study 'cos I remember how I did it last time, I can remember this.' And, yea, the study skills were always there they just needed bringing back, bringing back to the surface again.

*Study
skills,
prep for HE*

RW Yea. And You're obviously very good at time management as well, even if it's...

*probing -
personal
development*

Subject mentioned earlier

Subject Well I think any family man is good at time management. I mean there's always certain things need doing at certain time and you've got to make sure you're available to do it. Even just getting the kids to school, picking them up, meals, washing.

Appendix 3 Sample of statistical analysis

All students

	Progressing			Not progressing		
	O	E		O	E	
Hum day	45	49.5	0.41	42	37.5	0.54
evening	22	21.6	0.01	16	16.4	0.01
Science	12	8.5	1.41	3	6.5	1.86
Mod day	28	25.0	0.35	16	19.0	0.47
evening	17	19.3	0.28	17	14.7	0.37
	124	124.0	2.46	94	94.0	3.24

Chi squared 5.70
Df=4 not significant at p=0.05

Science students

	Completing			Not completing		
	O	E		O	E	
male	12	11.5	0.00002	7	7.5	0.00003
female	8	8.5	0.00003	6	5.5	0.00004
	20		0.00005	13		0.00007

(Yates correction applied)

Chi squared 0.00012
Df=1 not significant at p=0.05